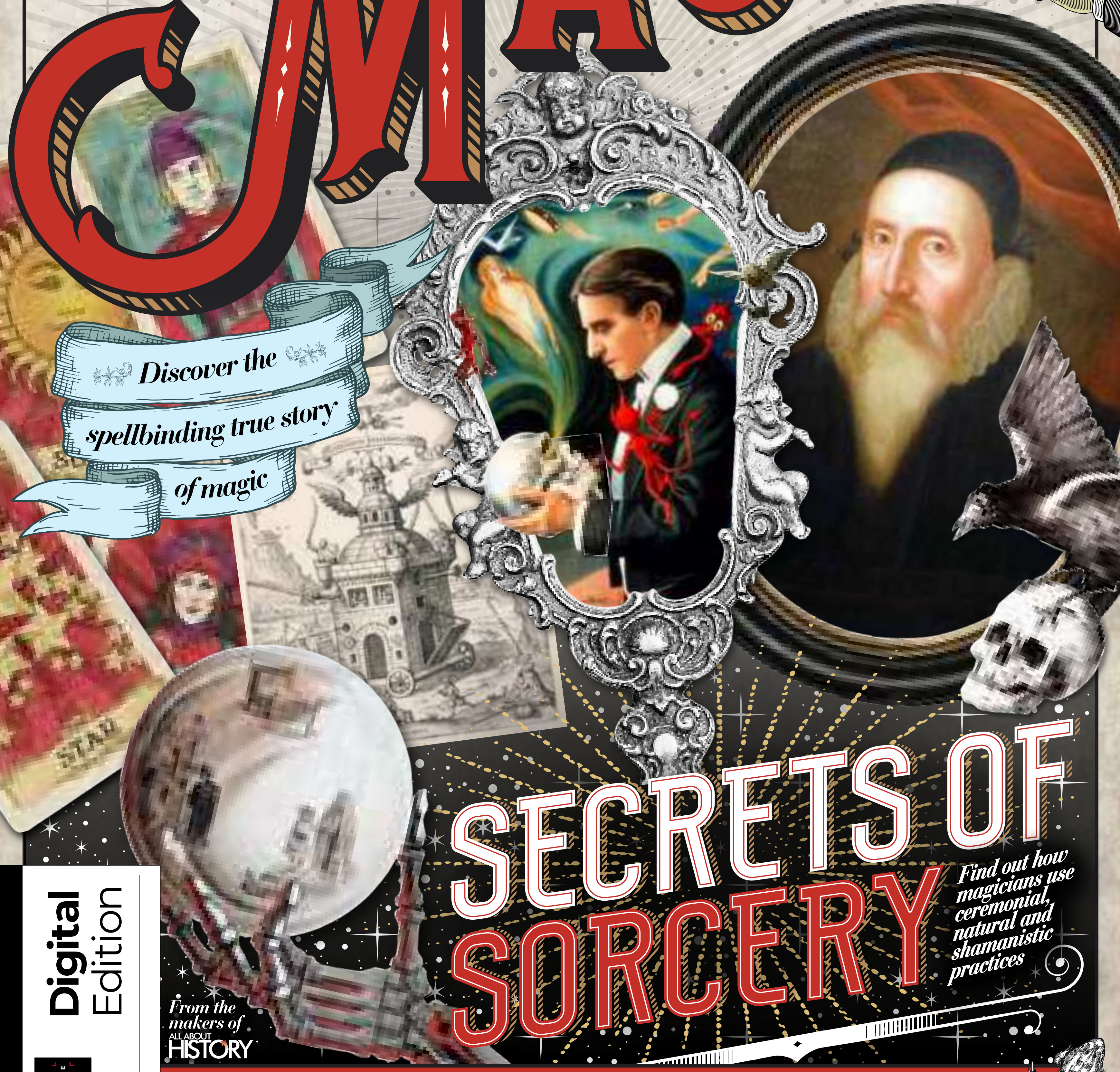
NEW

History of MAGIC



Discover the spellbinding true story of magic

SECRETS OF SORCERY

Find out how magicians use ceremonial, natural and shamanistic practices

From the makers of ALL ABOUT HISTORY

Digital Edition

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ANCIENT TRADITIONS ◆ SPELLS & RITUALS ◆ DIVINATION & GRIMOIRES

Welcome to

History of Magic

Do you believe in magic? People have done so for thousands of years, sometimes embracing it, sometimes reviling it. History of Magic tells the story of those centuries of belief, from the mysterious ancient Persian priests who gave their name to the concept, to the tenets of modern magic as practiced by today's chaos magicians. Along the way, you'll learn about the complex role of magic in the ancient and medieval eras, explore the seven forbidden arts and other magical practices, discover the secrets of the alchemists, witness the decline of magic and the Occult Revival, and meet the modern practitioners who have revolutionised magic throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. You'll encounter witches, wizards, legendary figures and contemporary magicians, learn about some of the most influential theorists, historians and practitioners of magic throughout the ages and what they did, and discover the spellbinding secrets of sorcery...

FUTURE

History of Magic

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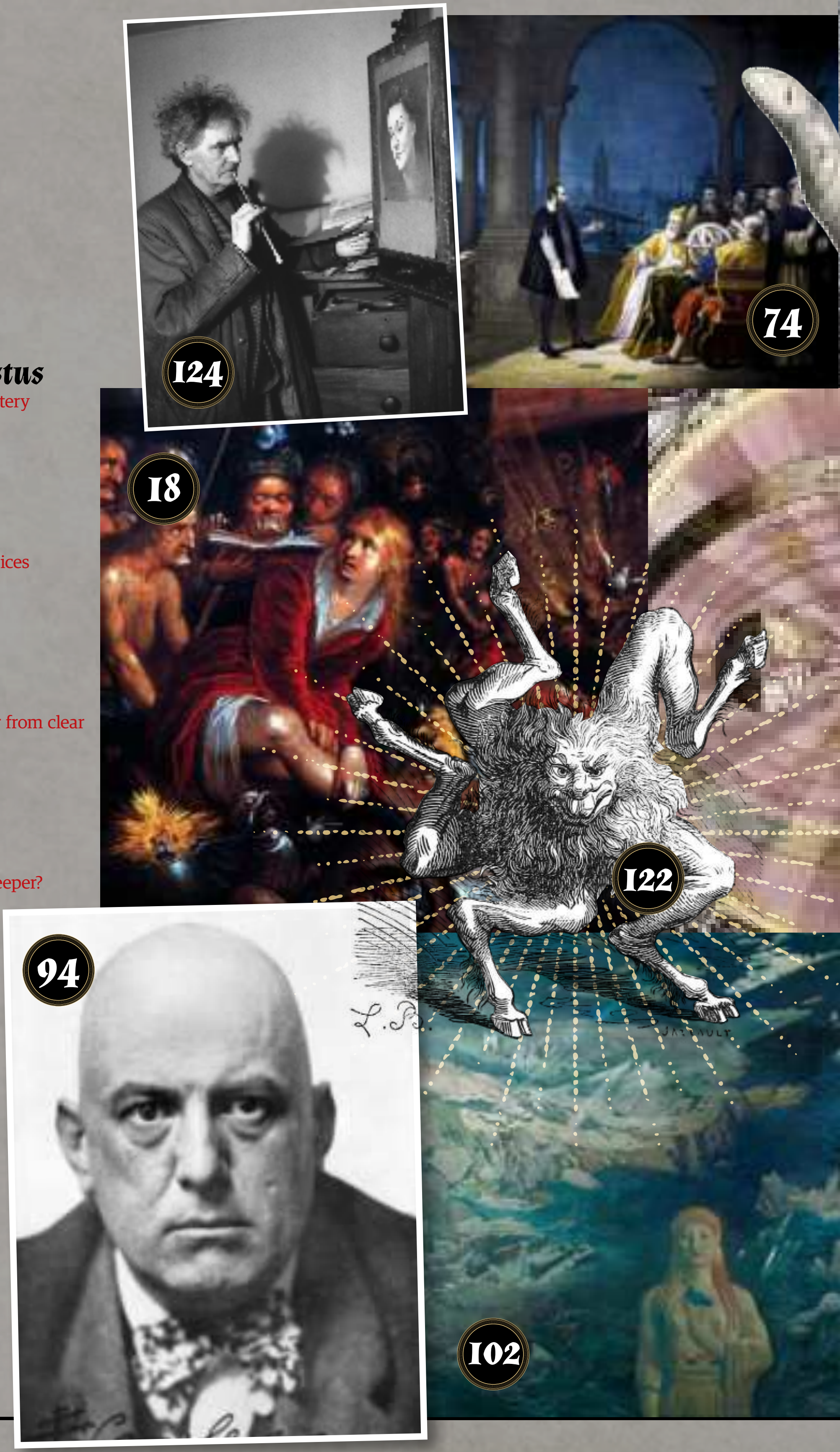

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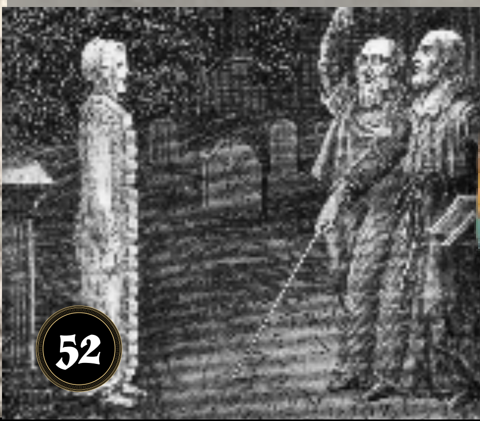


Magical thinking

Magic has a long and venerable history that has been entwined with and had an important influence on both religion and science for centuries, and still resonates with people today

Written by April Madden

Magic through the ages

- **Primal rites**
  Paleolithic peoples create artwork based around the acknowledgement of prey animals and the ritual propitiation of their ancestors. Some paintings include strange, human-animal hybrids that are later theorised to be shamanistic figures.
  Paleolithic era

Defining moment

Pyramid scheme

c. 2686-2181 BCE

The Pyramid Texts, dating from the ancient Egyptian Old Kingdom, are the oldest still-extant magical texts. Primarily related to the ancient Egyptian religion, particularly the cult of Osiris, the god of the afterlife and rebirth, they describe magical processes by which the dead can transform their spirit into an akh, an aspect of the soul that was believed to allow them to assume any form and visit the world of the living. Achieving the state of an akh required certain things: the soul had to be worthy according to the judgement of Maat, goddess of truth, and it needed both a tomb and a preserved body.

Defining moment

It's a kind of magi

5th century BCE

The Persian Empire's state religion, Zoroastrianism, introduces its priests, the magi, to territories across the Middle East, Mediterranean and parts of India, Africa and China, where this sculpture of a Zoroastrian priest originates (He is wearing a veil to protect the sacred flame of a Zoroastrian fire temple from being profaned by his breath). Politically powerful and credited with the capacity to command weather, interpret dreams and predict the future using astrology, their seemingly uncanny abilities see their name adopted by the ancient Greeks to describe sorcery, giving us the word 'magic' that we still use today.

- **Northern sorcery**
  The peoples of the Late Scandinavian Iron Age are known to practice two forms of magic, seiðr (a form of soothsaying), and galdr (enchantment; singing or speaking spells aloud). Their culture will go on influence huge tracts of northern Europe and Russia.
  5th century BCE

- **Druid science**
  The Celtic cultures of Europe and the British Isles are recorded as having religious leaders known as druids who are lore keepers and lawmakers, political advisors, practitioners of magic, and expert healers. A Greek scholar compared their philosophy to that of Pythagoras.
  4th century BCE

- **The rise of Christianity**
  The Christian religion dismisses and demonises magic in its earliest written records, starting with the figure of Simon Magus. This doctrine will spread throughout the Christian world and last for centuries.
  1st century CE

- **Cults of the chemists**
  People in Hellenic Egypt study the properties of metals, minerals and plant extracts as early as the 4th century BCE. They have fully synthesised this with Greek and Egyptian philosophy by the 3rd century CE to create a new way of understanding.
  3rd century CE

Many people don't believe in magic. But many people have in the past, and many people do now. Those who don't might dismiss this as silly, pointing out that there is no secret *Harry Potter* world hidden behind the mundane realities of everyday life. But in fact the theory and practice of magic has a long and venerable history, and whether you choose to believe in it or not, without some of its philosophical ideas and technological advances, the rational, scientific world of the 21st century would not be what it is today.

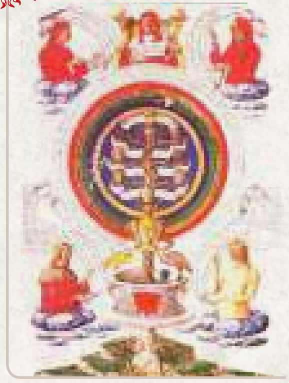
Sociologists often think of magic in relation to two other key ideas that we use to understand the world around us: religion and science. Religion attempts to explain the mysteries of existence through the prism of gods and the regulations that their priests set down for worshippers to follow, while science prefers to address these mysteries through detailed investigation of the immediate material universe, and through informed theorising about those parts of it too inaccessible to be studied in person.

Magic can be thought of as the halfway point between the two, and today's practitioners will tell you that it requires the wholehearted faith of one and the judicious rigour of the other. Certainly many contemporary practitioners of magic are also followers of pagan religions such as Wicca. But for centuries beforehand, magic was also used by a wide range of people of various faiths, or none, in the same way as we use scientific principles today: to make sense of and predict natural phenomena, to understand the nature of plants and animals, to develop medicines and techniques to heal injury and disease, and to create new and beautiful things.

But for many people there's still something more to the idea of magic than that, something that still makes it stand out as a separate concept to both religion and science. The controversial occultist Aleister Crowley put it best when he said that magic is "the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will". Put simply, Crowley's definition of magic is doing things designed to make what you want to happen, happen. This is how people have done so over the centuries.

Many of the sciences, like chemistry and astronomy, have their roots in ancient magical ideas

"Magic is the point between science and religion"



Defining moment

Alchemy reaches Europe

12th century

The Graeco-Egyptian system is adopted by Arab scholars, who name it al-kīmiyā'. Introduced to Europe via Muslim Spain, it becomes the province of scientifically inclined churchmen and gentleman-scholars who also study biblically inspired forms of magic. Alchemy's search for the mystical philosopher's stone and its concept of transmuting base metals into precious ones appeals to late medieval and Renaissance society, although it's possible that these concepts are in fact metaphors for the alchemist's personal and spiritual growth. Notable practitioners of alchemy in Europe include John Dee, court magician to Elizabeth I. Alchemical ideas will go on to influence the Occult Revival.

- **Season of the witch**
  Mass hysteria about demonic witchcraft grips Europe and the New World. The (predominantly Protestant Christian) witch hunters tend to focus their paranoia on women and lower-class men, particularly those practicing folk medicine in rural areas, rather than on the wealthy and powerful, whose alchemical research will soon become modern science.
  1580-c1750

- **Colonial bias**
  Western Europe's colonisation of the wider world sees it ride roughshod over entire nations' cultural pre-Christian religious and magical traditions – including its own. These practices are variously suppressed, imperfectly and inaccurately recorded, or dismissed as superstitious curiosities.
  17th-18th century

- **The Occult Revival**
  Bohemian intellectuals of the late Victorian period develop interests in Spiritualism, the study of pre-Christian religions and psychic power, which leads them to begin exploring the ideas of the alchemists, ancient pagan theology, and the remnants of folk magical traditions.
  Late 19th century

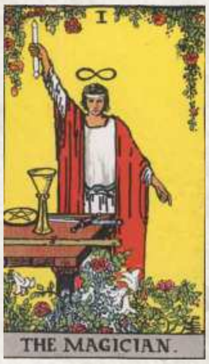
- **Battle magic**
  Ceremonial magicians such as Dion Fortune, and Wiccans like Gerald Gardner, quietly stage rites to protect Britain against the threat of bombings and invasion from the occult-obsessed Nazi German high command.
  1939-1945

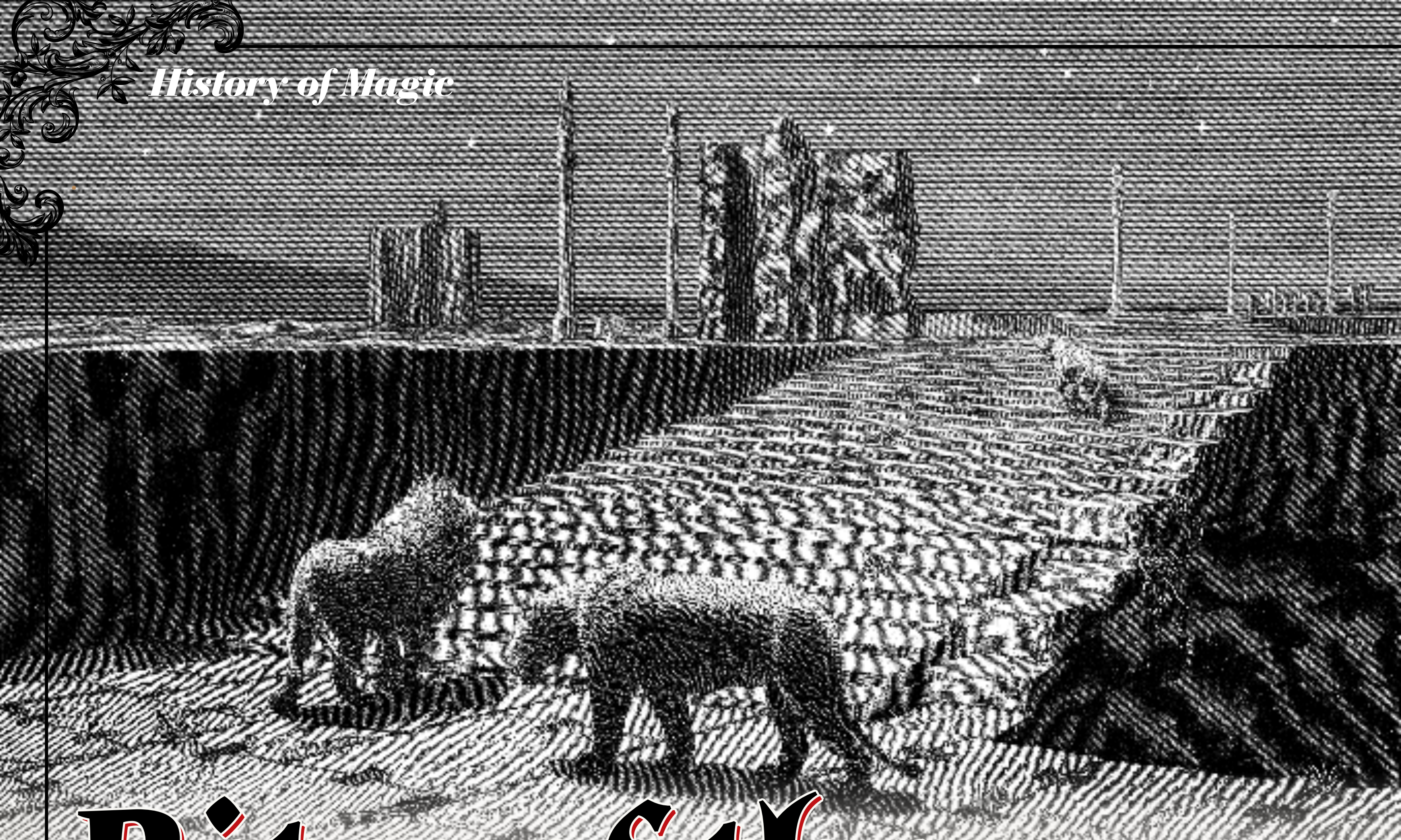
Defining moment

A new age

1950s-present

The repeal of Britain's Witchcraft Act in 1951 paves the way for a new vogue for magical thinking throughout the Western hemisphere. Wicca, with its focus on ritual magic, gains traction, as do other pagan spiritual paths. Tarot reading becomes popular; astrological predictions are published in mainstream newspapers and magazines. Some commentators tie this burgeoning interest in the occult to wider social issues and a need for people to feel in control of their lives; others suggest that the upswing in interest is due to disaffection with traditional religions, or even due to the increasing popularity of fantasy novels, comics, TV and movies.





Persepolis, capital of the Persian Empire, was the ancient centre of the Zoroastrian religion. Its priests gave their name to the practice of magic

Rites of the ancient mages

The idea of magic grew out of prehistoric cultural practices, before evolving in the cradle of civilisation

Some of the earliest examples of magical thinking can be seen in the art and artefacts left behind by our Paleolithic ancestors. While we don't have written records that explain to us what these ancient people meant thousands of years ago when they created these items, we can infer something of their use and meaning from context.

We know that in the Middle to Upper Paleolithic eras (between 80,000-40,000 years ago), hunter-gatherers improved many of their existing technologies and created new ones. They also began to create art, and this gives us a clue as to what they might have been thinking. Cave paintings of prey animals may show a simple record of what to kill and when, which older hunters would have narrated to younger ones. Or they may show evidence of an animistic belief system, in which the spirit of the prey is trapped in a ritually drawn image before the hunt, enabling hunters to capture and kill it, or in which the group honours the animal's sacrifice after its death by immortalising it in paint. Some sites feature images of strange half-human, half-animal hybrids that hint at an even deeper and more meaningful shamanic relationship with the natural world.

These ancient people also propitiated the spirits of their ancestors with grave offerings, and this gave rise to cultic rituals around death and the afterlife. The greatest example of this is the belief system that came into being in ancient Egypt, and it's here that the oldest known religious texts in the world were discovered. We call the Pyramid Texts religious because they are set firmly within a well-documented theology, but a better adjective might be magical, because it's spells that these texts

> "Herodotus describes the magu calming a storm by using wizard's spells on the wind"

contain. Specifically, the instructions, carved into the inner walls of tombs, contain directions that the dead need to follow to protect their remains and enter the afterlife.

In the ancient world, then, religion and magic were tightly intertwined, and nowhere was this more visible than in Persia. Once the largest empire the world had ever seen, it held sway over lands from Europe to Africa to India, and its language and culture affects theirs even to this day. During its Achaemenid Empire a social class rose that was made up of the priests of Persia's state religion, Zoroastrianism. The priests were called 'magu', a word that derives from the Proto-Indo-European 'magh'. 'Magh' means 'capable of' or 'able to'; a 'maguš', then, is someone who is able to and capable of doing… something.

The Greek historian Herodotus described these magu, or magi, as royal advisors, ritual practitioners, and dream interpreters. They studied astronomy and were able to predict eclipses and meteor showers; some of their shrines were fire temples in which a sacred flame always burned, seemingly of its own volition (often thanks to some clever engineering or the presence of a vent of natural gas), and they had a firm grip on Persian royal power and on the hearts and minds of the populace, both of which fuelled their international reputation for the uncanny. In one memorable passage from the seventh book of his *Histories*, Herodotus describes the magu calming a storm by making sacrifices to the ancestor spirits and goddesses of the sea, using "wizards' spells on the wind".

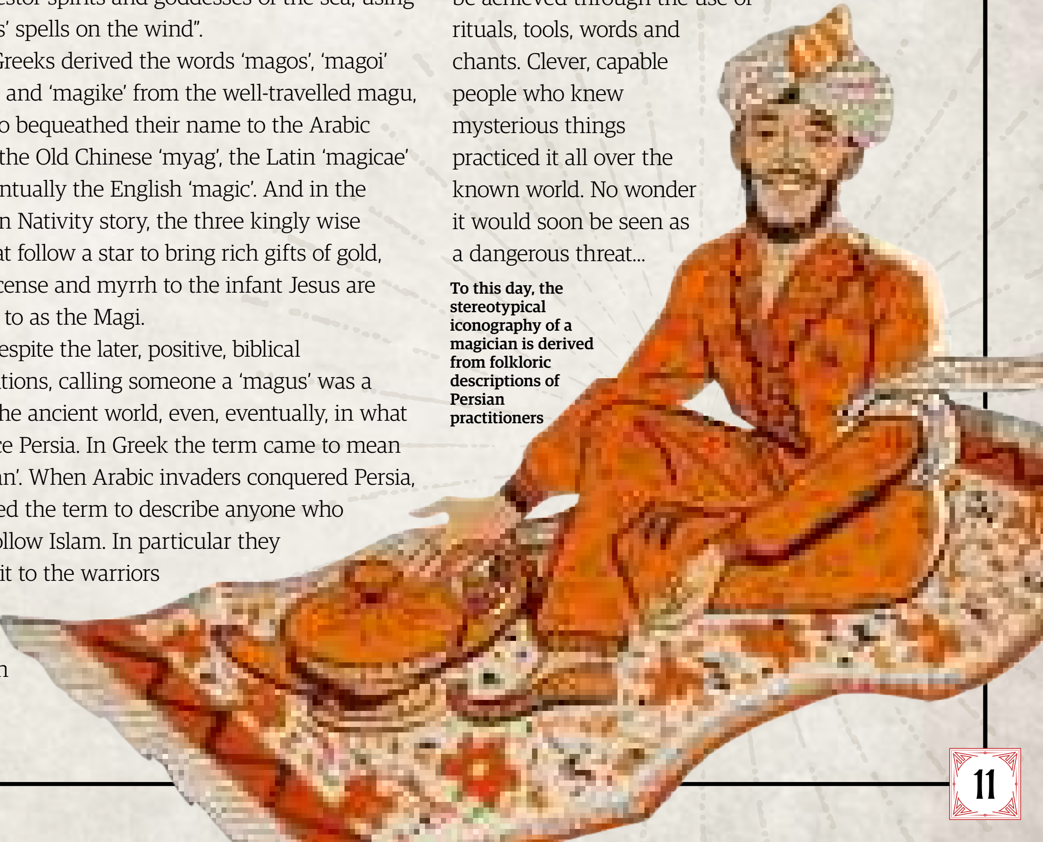
The Greeks derived the words 'magos', 'magoi' 'magiea' and 'magike' from the well-travelled magu, who also bequeathed their name to the Arabic 'majūs', the Old Chinese 'myag', the Latin 'magicae' and eventually the English 'magic'. And in the Christian Nativity story, the three kingly wise men that follow a star to bring rich gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant Jesus are referred to as the Magi.

But despite the later, positive, biblical connotations, calling someone a 'magus' was a slur in the ancient world, even, eventually, in what was once Persia. In Greek the term came to mean 'charlatan'. When Arabic invaders conquered Persia, they used the term to describe anyone who didn't follow Islam. In particular they applied it to the warriors from the far north that arrived via Byzantium to trade for silk with them. To the Muslim Arabs, these northerners were unbelievers, pagans and heathens like the defeated Persians and their priesthood, and so they called them by the same name: 'al-Majūs'. Today, we know them as the Vikings.

Persia's place in the heartland of civilisation and trade meant its word for magic was adopted throughout the world

The Vikings may not have used the word 'magic' themselves but they had a very clear concept of it. Their word for it was 'fjölkyngi' or 'great knowledge', and it was codified into systems. 'Seiðr' or sorcery was practiced by women (And occasionally some men, although they were considered 'ergi' or taboo). The word-root comes from the Proto-Indo-European 'sehi', 'to bind', and indeed, these sorceresses carried distaff-like wands that they used to literally spin charms like thread. The metaphysical link of thread with time and fate meant that they were also soothsayers. The second system was called 'galdr', which means 'incantation' and derives from the Proto-Indo-European word for singing. Men and women could practice galdr by vocalising certain rhythmic spells - literal enchantment. These spells could also be enacted by spelling out the runes of the Norse Futhark script, which was considered magical in and of itself.

By the end of antiquity, then, the concept of magic had already become the stuff of legend. It offered understanding of the elements and stars, knowledge of the past, present and future, even power over life and death, all of which could be achieved through the use of rituals, tools, words and chants. Clever, capable people who knew mysterious things practiced it all over the known world. No wonder it would soon be seen as a dangerous threat…


To this day, the stereotypical iconography of a magician is derived from folkloric descriptions of Persian practitioners

The math magician

Mathematics is, to us, the most rational and reasonable of subjects. So it may surprise you to learn that one of its most important figures, Pythagoras, was in fact considered capable of performing magic. The Ionian Greek mathematician and philosopher was a follower of the Orphic Mysteries, a cult dedicated to Orpheus, the legendary poet and musician thought to be the son of the Muse Calliope. Pythagoras forbade his own followers from eating beans due to their supposed magical connection with the shades of the dead in the underworld, and was alleged to have performed a range of wizardly feats. These included being seen during the same hour in two separate cities, charming a wild white eagle that let him stroke it, being greeted by a river that said "Hail, Pythagoras!" to him, accurately predicting that a dead man would be aboard a ship entering the local harbour, accurately predicting the appearance of a white bear nearby (and that it was dead) before the messenger bearing the news had reached him, and biting a venomous snake to death. These stories link him to Orpheus; both are what the Greeks called 'theios aner' or 'divine men', a term used for performers of magic who were socially acceptable, rather than the barbarian magu.

Pythagoras, an initiate of the Orphic Mysteries, was considered to have magical powers in addition to his intellectual prowess

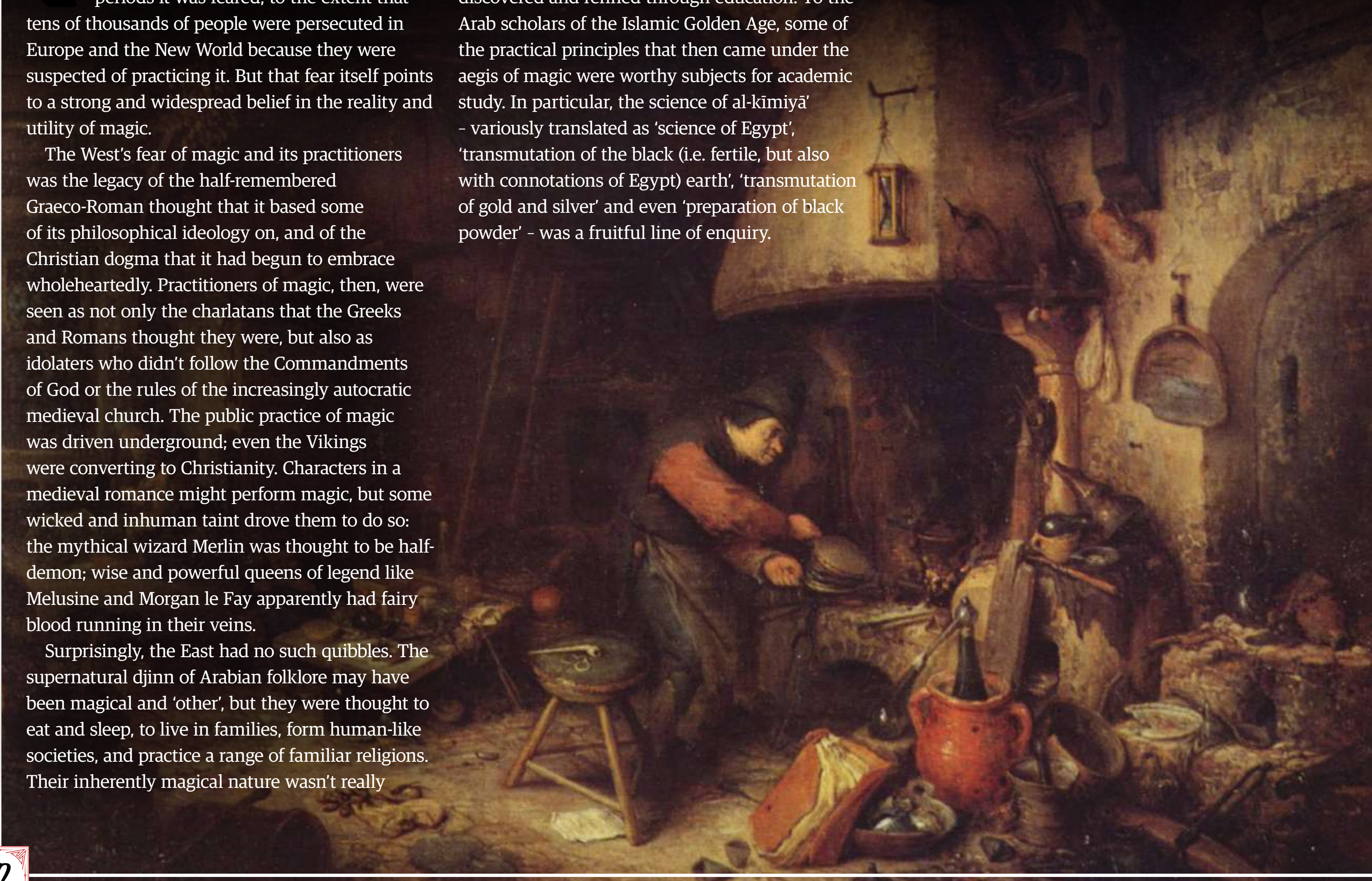
Fear of a black magic

Sorcery was viewed with fear and superstition in the medieval West, while Eastern civilisations began to explore its arcane expertise

The time between the classical era and the Age of Reason was a golden age for magic. It seems strange to say this when for much of the medieval and early modern periods it was feared, to the extent that tens of thousands of people were persecuted in Europe and the New World because they were suspected of practicing it. But that fear itself points to a strong and widespread belief in the reality and utility of magic.

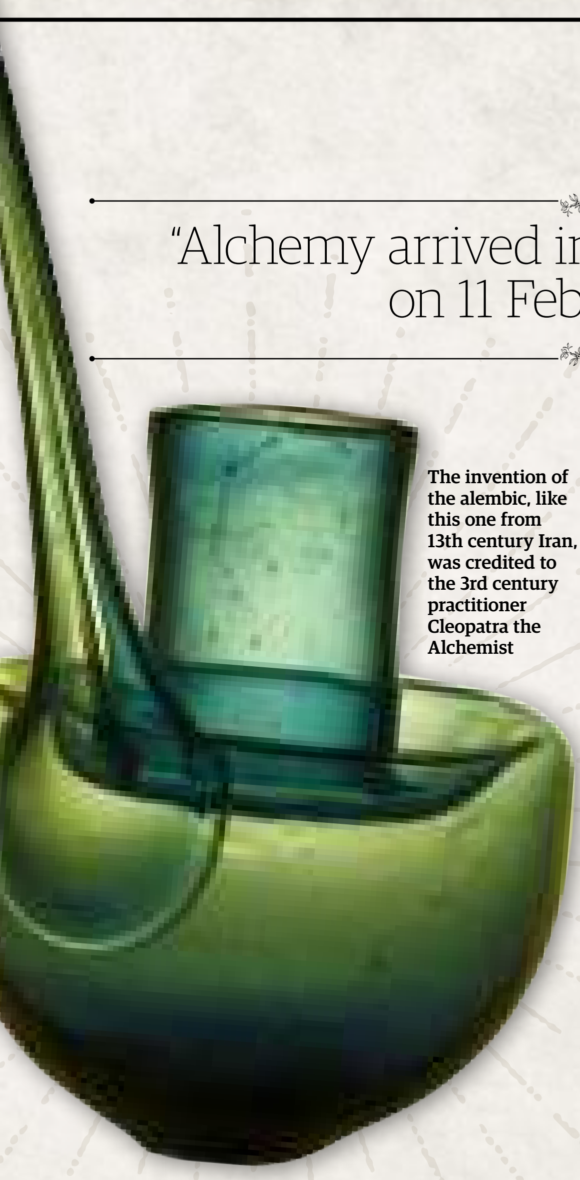
The West's fear of magic and its practitioners was the legacy of the half-remembered Graeco-Roman thought that it based some of its philosophical ideology on, and of the Christian dogma that it had begun to embrace wholeheartedly. Practitioners of magic, then, were seen as not only the charlatans that the Greeks and Romans thought they were, but also as idolaters who didn't follow the Commandments of God or the rules of the increasingly autocratic medieval church. The public practice of magic was driven underground; even the Vikings were converting to Christianity. Characters in a medieval romance might perform magic, but some wicked and inhuman taint drove them to do so: the mythical wizard Merlin was thought to be half-demon; wise and powerful queens of legend like Melusine and Morgan le Fay apparently had fairy blood running in their veins.

Surprisingly, the East had no such quibbles. The supernatural djinn of Arabian folklore may have been magical and 'other', but they were thought to eat and sleep, to live in families, form human-like societies, and practice a range of familiar religions. Their inherently magical nature wasn't really an issue, and despite their apparent appetite for carrion they were no more or less capable of evil than humans. As with any other sentient being, the proper uses of their powers could only be discovered and refined through education. To the Arab scholars of the Islamic Golden Age, some of the practical principles that then came under the aegis of magic were worthy subjects for academic study. In particular, the science of al-kīmiyā' – variously translated as 'science of Egypt', 'transmutation of the black (i.e. fertile, but also with connotations of Egypt) earth', 'transmutation of gold and silver' and even 'preparation of black powder' – was a fruitful line of enquiry.



While medieval Europe feared magic, the Middle East embraced subjects such as alchemy, which finally reached Europe in the 12th century

"Alchemy arrived in Europe with a bang on 11 February 1144"



The invention of the alembic, like this one from 13th century Iran, was credited to the 3rd century practitioner Cleopatra the Alchemist

Alchemy's earliest roots lie in Hellenistic Egypt in the 4th century BCE, at the crossover point between ancient Egyptian science and spellcraft and the philosophical and technical prowess of the ancient Greeks. Its earliest practitioners, male and female, followed a variety of faiths, including the religions of the book and various pagan theologies. They made dyes and medicines and studied metallurgy and the behaviour of minerals: alchemy has always had a close relationship with science, and the modern science of chemistry derives its name from it. These alchemists lived in a cultural melting pot; the major Greek philosophies of Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Stoicism and Gnosticism were studied and debated by alchemy's clever, curious, educated practitioners, merging with Egyptian ideas about the god Thoth, thrice-great lord of knowledge, science, philosophy, religion and magic. The Ptolemaic Greeks syncretised Thoth with his Hellenic equivalent, Hermes, through their system of interpretatio Graeca, creating the figure of Hermes Trismegistus (see p28), and by the 650s CE, alchemy was less a science for working with chemicals and more a framework for understanding the transformative powers of intent and ritual; a mystical way of probing the secrets of the universe. The theoretical transformations of lead into silver and gold, the power of the philosopher's stone, were seen as metaphors for personal, spiritual and magical growth. They were the keys to hidden powers, usable only by trained practitioners who followed the proper, encoded formulae. To this day, 'hermetic' means 'tightly closed, inaccessible'. This hermetic alchemy was influential eastwards as far away as India; a parallel variant evolved in China, which was more focused on medicine than metalwork, and gave rise to the invention of gunpowder.

Alchemy arrived in Europe with a bang on 11 February 1144 thanks to one man, an English Arabophile working in the Iberian Peninsula, named Robert of Chester. He translated one book of alchemy; thereafter alchemical texts flooded into Christian Spain from the neighbouring Muslim realm of al-Andalus, were translated into Latin, and made their way north. Highly placed academic theologians began trumpeting the value of rationalism and Aristotelian thought, but in the superstitious Europe of the Middle Ages, little of this sank into the popular consciousness. Famous medieval European practitioners of the scientific side of alchemy included Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas and Roger Bacon. All three were highly placed churchmen, but in the medieval mind they were suspected of being wizards and mages. Bacon was rumoured to have sculpted a head out of bronze that could speak and answer questions.

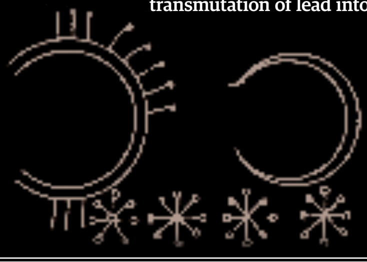
As the medieval period gave way to the early modern era in Europe, these highly placed practitioners of alchemy were soon differentiated from the common or garden cunning folk that brewed cures and potions, cast love spells and averted curses. The Witch Hunts of the early modern period would see tens of thousands of people dead, most of whom wouldn't have had the first idea how to cast a spell, or even how to spell their own name. But for the gentleman-alchemist like John Dee and his successors, magic was now a legitimate line of enquiry in the study of natural philosophy. The Renaissance concept of magia naturalis – natural magic – encompassed alchemy, astrology and herbalism and the sciences that grew from them: chemistry and astronomy and botany. It was the study of the natural world and the force that was thought to animate and influence it, a scholarly and useful quest for knowledge that had nothing in common with the transgressive, demonically inspired witches that hung from the gibbets of Europe and the New World. Those natural magicians who were still trafficking with arcane forces and esoteric powers now did so quietly, behind (hermetically) closed doors. And who in the emerging Age of Reason would believe that they were doing anything at all?

Many early alchemical texts were lost when the Roman Emperor Diocletian ordered them burned in the 3rd century CE

A star of science

The alchemists existed at a crossroads between magic and science, and a fantastic exemplar of this is Cleopatra the Alchemist. Thought to be active in 3rd century CE Alexandria, Macedonian-Egyptian Cleopatra was regarded as one of the earliest recorded practicing alchemists and one of only four female alchemists who could produce the philosopher's stone (although it's unclear whether this was an actual physical object or a metaphysical idea). She is credited with the invention of the alembic, a distillation device still in use by chemists and alcohol distillers today, and was described by her contemporaries as knowledgeable and erudite. The legendary Ostanes, credited with introducing Egyptian magic to ancient Greece, apparently said to her that: "In thee is concealed a strange and terrible mystery. Enlighten us, casting your light upon the elements". This is quoted in the *Dialogue of Cleopatra and the Philosophers*, an ancient text that purports to describe an educational meeting, perhaps a symposium, between Cleopatra and several other practitioners of alchemy. Cleopatra also produced a mysterious document called the *Chrysopoeia* ('gold-making') *of Cleopatra*, which consists entirely of diagrams and symbols. Her writings were described as grandiose, metaphorical and allusive, describing alchemical processes in relation to conception, motherhood and nurturing.

This diagram from Cleopatra the Alchemist's *Chrysopoeia* is thought to symbolise the transmutation of lead into silver



Disenchantment and a New Age

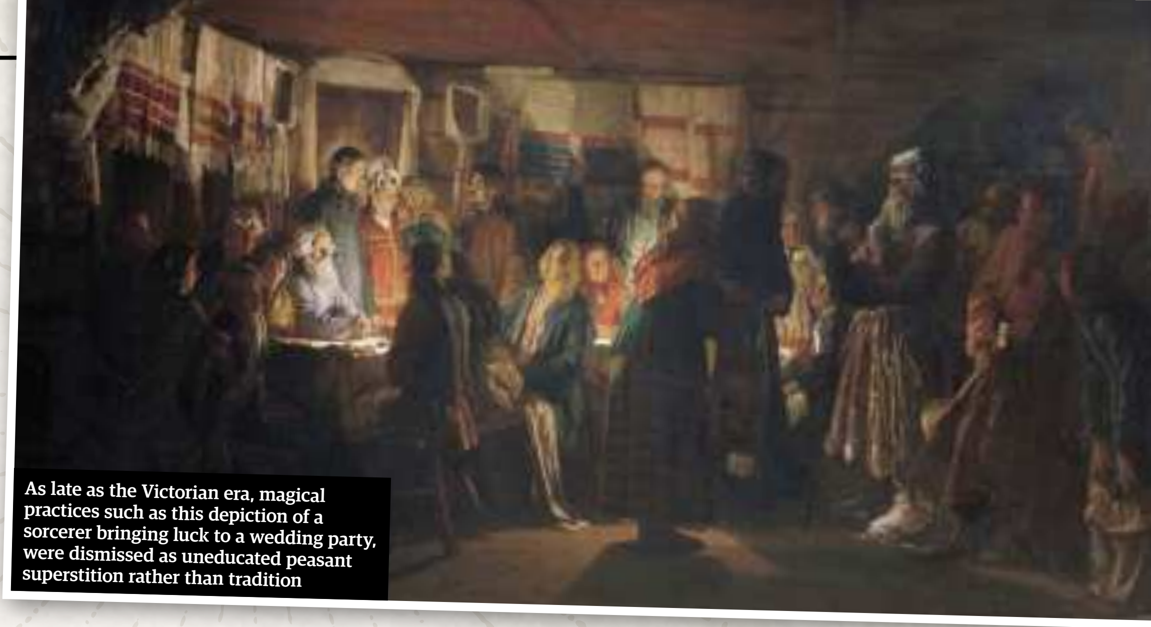
The Age of Reason may have obscured them, but magical traditions were just waiting to be rediscovered

Today, many traditional magical practices have been normalised again and are consulted by a wide range of people

The Age of Reason was closely tied to the Age of Discovery, the colonial era in which Western powers, buoyed by their advanced technology, conquered and commandeered vast tracts of the rest of the world. In these mysterious new territories, notably Africa, European colonists came across indigenous religions and practices. With overwhelming arrogance, the patriarchal European power structure showed no interest in learning about these rites and beliefs, instead syncretising them with the assumptions that had been made about European folk magic in the 16th and 17th centuries. At best, they were seen as foolish anthropological quirks, symbolic of the misguided notion that the conquered peoples were intellectually inferior to and culturally less advanced than their oppressors; at worst they were seen as proof that these people practiced witchcraft, devilment and heresy that should be harshly suppressed by the colonisers for the sake of the natives' souls. Magic was dismissed as something irrational and non-existent, practiced by old wives, idiots and savages who didn't know any better; it spoke to an absence of logic and rationalism that betrayed its practitioners' intellectual, racial or cultural inferiority.

This paternalistic, hubristic attitude did the practices of both European and world magic few favours. Rich and specific traditions from different places were unceremoniously grouped together, labelled as backward and uncivilised superstition, and either deliberately quashed or recorded piecemeal as anthropological curiosities. As a result, the survivals from this era are often broken or incomplete, cultural shards that have been divorced from the nuances of their original meaning. Gaps that were later filled in from other traditions that were all lumped together like this now often smack uncomfortably of cultural appropriation or colonial bias. Yet despite the huge problems with the deliberate disenchantment of the Age of Reason, there were still more open-minded Western practitioners, often heirs to the hermetic traditions, who were prepared to continue exploring both their own magical customs and those of the wider world. It's worth noting however, that not every practitioner was open-minded

> "In the wake of World War II, people were looking for new ways of seeing the world"



As late as the Victorian era, magical practices such as this depiction of a sorcerer bringing luck to a wedding party, were dismissed as uneducated peasant superstition rather than tradition

and accepting. Some of the Esotericists of the Occult Revival (see p86) sought power rather than understanding in their appropriation of traditions from around the world. Some adhered to the narrow-minded racial prejudices that were typical of their time and culture; others went even further and embraced the supremacist ideologies of the new and rising political philosophy of fascism, which had a deep fascination with the occult.

Meanwhile, in the early to mid 20th century, philosophies that distrusted religion, such as communism, secularism and humanism, found magic a useful stick to beat it with. Glossing over the debt that science owes to the some of the early concepts of magic, like alchemy – while claiming at the same time to promote scientific rationalism – commentators like HL Mencken used comparisons with the 'outdated' concepts of magic to satirise and mock key religious ideas like holiness, prayer and miracles in an attempt to place religion on the same 'uncivilised', 'irrational' conceptual level as so-called primitive folk traditions. At a time when conventional religious institutions were seeing a downswing in popularity, it was the perfect insult to level at the Western faiths that had traditionally distrusted and even persecuted practitioners of magic.

But magic wasn't going to stay down forever. The Esoteric traditions may have appealed to a certain middle class demographic in the early 20th century, but in the wake of World War II, a much broader range of people were looking around for new ways of seeing the world and taking control of their lives. The old Establishment institutions of church, state and academia were seen as either fading in the face of increased secularity, or complicit in the capitalist grab for resources and power that was seen as the root of the early to mid 20th century's global conflicts. As early as the 1950s, with the repeal of Britain's last Witchcraft Act in 1951, practitioners of what they claimed were ancient pagan religions were publicising their magical traditions. Gerald Gardner (p112) and Alex Sanders (p118) were at the forefront of the creation of Wicca, but this was far from the only magical tradition that emerged as the counter-culture movements of the New Age began to find a foothold in the 20th and 21st century psyche.

Magic's continued appeal speaks to people's desire to take control of their lives and find new and deeper meanings in them

The term 'New Age' is in itself problematic. Many followers of today's pagan religions – who make up the majority of what we think of as today's main practitioners of magic – prefer to think of their faiths as directly linked to a long heritage of ancient traditions. They are followers, they argue, not of a New Age, but an Old Religion. Debate rages between practitioners and scholars as to whether the practical lineages of these faiths can be considered to be unbroken or whether they have been rebuilt out of the dismissive or well-meaning anthropological texts of the 19th century, the secretive hermetic knowledge of the Esotericists, or plain old wishful thinking. Others raise concerns about an umbrella term that attempts to encompass a range of disparate practices, from Spiritualism to angel-channelling to UFOlogy to occultism. Many of the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s that evinced an interest in magic embraced syncretism and adopted magical or spiritual traditions from Native Americans, Africans and other previously oppressed peoples. They may have aimed for a holistic and fraternal synthesis of traditions, but can now face accusations of cultural appropriation from the groups that they were attempting to emulate or embrace. Meanwhile, adherents of scientific rationalism or fundamental faiths still find in magic something to mock or to fear, and certainly to try and marginalise or proscribe.

Yet in a world in which an entire generation was raised on the everyday sorcery of *Harry Potter*, it's unsurprising that, despite its sometimes-problematic recent social history, magic still flourishes. In an age when many people are disaffected with the current socio-political climate, Aleister Crowley's idea that change can be effected by the power of the will is a beguiling one. The phrase "re-enchantment is resistance" is gaining traction on social media; stores are full of clothes and accessories bedecked with occult and arcane symbols; tarot readers and astrologers are consulted by an ever-widening range of people. Today, magic is a common trope in books, movies, TV, videogames, even pop music. It may be centuries old, but magic is showing no signs of going away.

Sage: syncretism or stealing?

Many of today's magical, New Age and Mind Body Spirit-focused traditions encourage the use of sage 'smudge sticks' to purify a home, a gathering of people, or a ritual space. Sage is widely considered to be a cleansing herb and is used in traditional herbal medicine in a variety of cultures. Most new practitioners who adopt this use for it – burning bundles of sage like incense – are introduced to the practice through guidebooks or websites related to the tradition that they're interested in; many people who are interested in witchcraft began using it this way. But this use of sage is particular to some Indigenous and Native American tribes and was only adopted by other magical traditions in the US in the 1960s. Not only is this not made clear to those who are introduced to the practice via some neopagan or New Age sources, for some Indigenous practitioners it's a very specific and sacred rite that differs from tribe to tribe and ceremony to ceremony. Some have rules about who can perform the rite, and when, and where, in much the same way every other religion has certain activities that can only be performed by priests, sometimes only priests of a certain level. For these people, the imitation of their rituals by others can be considered misappropriation.

White sage is a sacred plant in some Indigenous and Native American traditions, but its wider use by other magical practitioners is controversial

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Oracle bones

Thousands of years ago, during the Shang dynasty, the Chinese carved questions into ox bones and turtle shells, hoping for answers

Written by Poppy-Jay Palmer

Pyromancy, or the art of divination by means of fire, was heavily used by diviners in ancient China, mainly during the late Shang dynasty, specifically scapulimancy and plastromancy, both of which involved reading oracle bones.

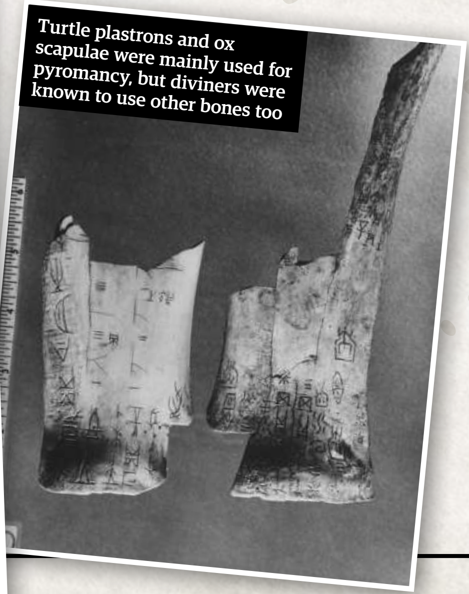
Questions regarding crops, weather, military endeavours, the fortunes of members of the royal family and the like were presented to diviners, who would use a sharp tool to carve the questions into pieces of ox scapula (scapulimancy) and turtle plastron (plastromancy) in oracle bone script. To receive the answers, they would heat a metal rod and apply it to the bone or shell until it gave way to thermal expansion and cracked. The diviners were then able to interpret the pattern left by the cracks, and record their prognostication.

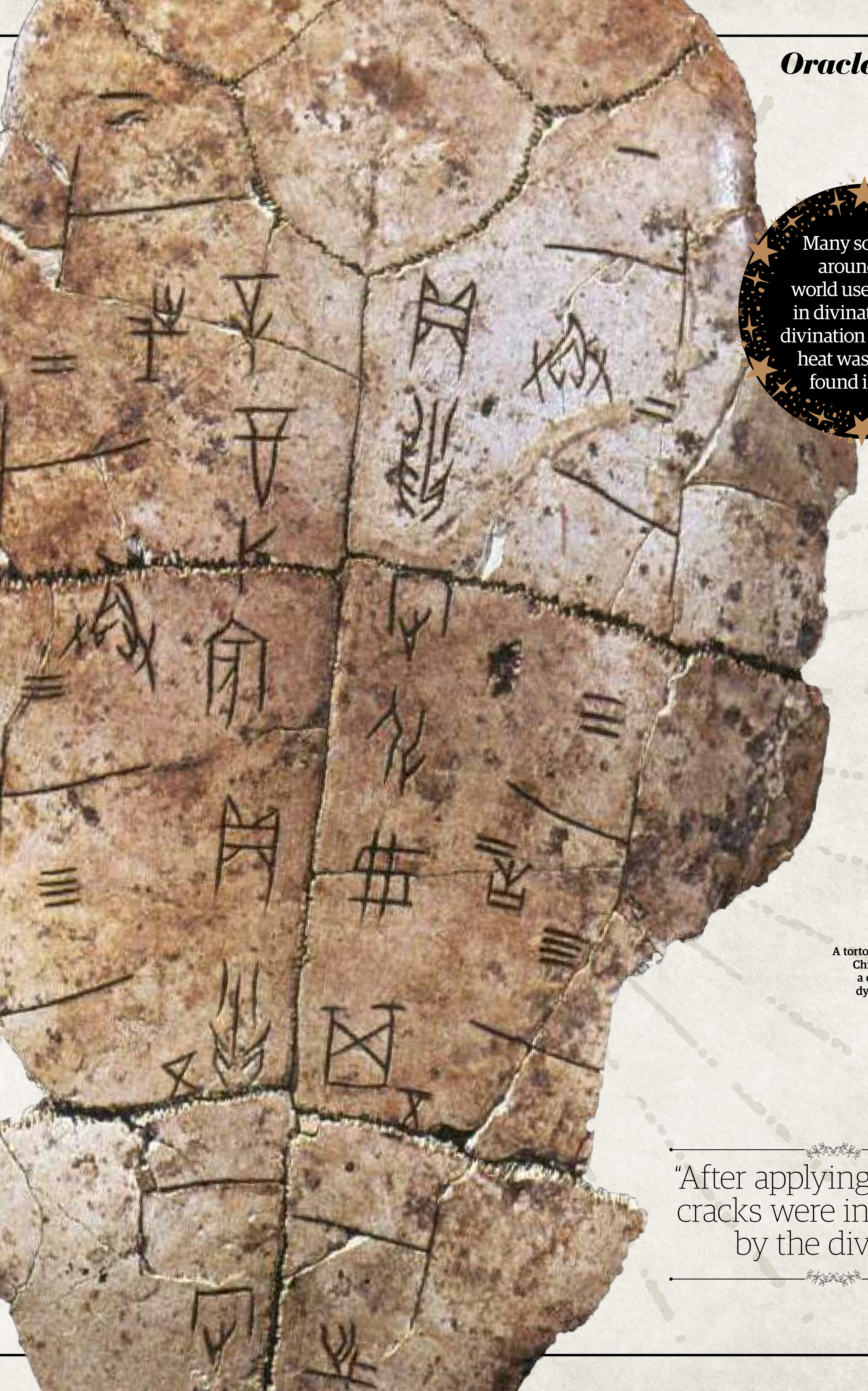
> Many of the divining questions were directed at the ancestors, whom the ancient Chinese worshipped and revered

Though turtle plastrons (the ventral and belly shells, usually from female turtles) and ox scapulae were primarily used for this kind of pyromancy, other animal bones were occasionally inscribed too – including the skulls of deer, oxen and humans. While preparing the oracle bones for use in a divining ceremony, diviners would clean them of flesh, and then thoroughly scour them to create a smooth, flat surface. Pits and hollows were then drilled partway into the bones in rows, which predetermined what kind of cracks would form during the divination. They would anoint the bones with blood before using ordinals called the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches to record the date, the diviner's name and the question. After applying a heat source, the cracks were interpreted by the diviner in charge of the ceremony, but the way in which they were interpreted is still unknown.

Scapulimancy and plastromancy both endured in China through to the Zhou dynasty, and during the Sui and Tang dynasties local farmers began periodically unearthing the oracle bones. Not realising what they were, the bones were frequently reburied. However, they were uncovered once again during the 19th century and were often used in place of 'dragon bones' in traditional Chinese medicine, where ancient pharmacists would grind up Pleistocene fossils to use in tonics and poultices. Ground turtle shells were used to treat malaria, while powdered ox bones (among bones from other animals) were used on knife wounds. Unfortunately, later questions to the diviners were written with brushes and cinnabar ink instead of being carved into the bones, so the recorded prophecies have since faded with time.

Oracle bones are still being discovered all over China in archaeological dig sites, like this one in Qishan County


Turtle plastrons and ox scapulae were mainly used for pyromancy, but diviners were known to use other bones too



A tortoise shell inscribed with Chinese characters during a divination ritual, Shang dynasty (c.1766-1122 BCE)

Many societies around the world used bones in divination, but divination involving heat was mostly found in Asia

> "After applying heat, the cracks were interpreted by the diviner"

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Varieties of magic

Within the world of magic we find many types of mystical practices, each with their own histories and powers

Written by Ben Gazur

For some, the world is nothing but atoms and energy working mechanistically to produce all we see around us, but for others there is another layer of reality. For them the universe is imbued with magic – a magic that permeates everything and can be used by those with the right, often esoteric, knowledge.

Perhaps appropriately for a subject that falls beyond the realm of the normal there is no simple definition of magic. If we describe magic as a set of practices that use supernatural powers to influence events then most religions and prayer would fall within the sphere of magic. That people would feel uncomfortable with describing religion as magic reveals the deep uneasiness with which magic has always been viewed. Magic is often the recourse of those without power, those outside of society, and those the mainstream would call 'the other.' Excluding religion brings its own problems though, as it ignores how often magic appears within religious traditions and texts.

If we do accept a broad definition of magic that excludes religion then we do not approach anything even close to uniformity. Magic comes in many forms. This should not be a surprise, as magic in one form or other has been around as far back in history as we can look and in all cultures. As a magical tradition evolves, it changes to fit the needs of the time and place it exists in. Despite the mutable nature of magic, it is possible to map three broad categories into which most aspects of it can be fitted: ceremonial, natural and shamanistic.

Ceremonial magic is the ritualistic form of magic that many people are familiar with from films and books dealing with the occult. Practitioners of ceremonial magic flourished in the Renaissance when books appeared describing the complex rites required to summon demons, foresee the future and perform any number of amazing feats.

Natural magic focuses on the hidden properties of the universe. Users of natural magic do not seek to create their own powers, but merely to exploit the magic that is inherent in the world. Astrologers did not want to control the heavens, only learn from them. Natural magic required only the knowledge of its existence to use it.

Shamanism links a wide range of beliefs and practices. Typically, shamans have access to other planes of existence and exert influence through spirits. By channelling these spirit forces, shamans can alter the physical world. As we shall see, the world of magic is not a unified one, but a many-layered universe of deeply personal experiences.

Sympathetic magic

Sir James Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*, described sympathetic magic as "like produces like". At its heart, this branch of magic uses representation to produce an effect.

In imitative sympathetic magic, a representation of a person or object is created and subjected to the change the magic user wishes to bring about in them. The best-known version of this is the voodoo doll used to harm someone at a distance. A needle placed in the doll will produce pain in the target. A wax figure of a person may be created and then melted away with the desire to see the person wither.

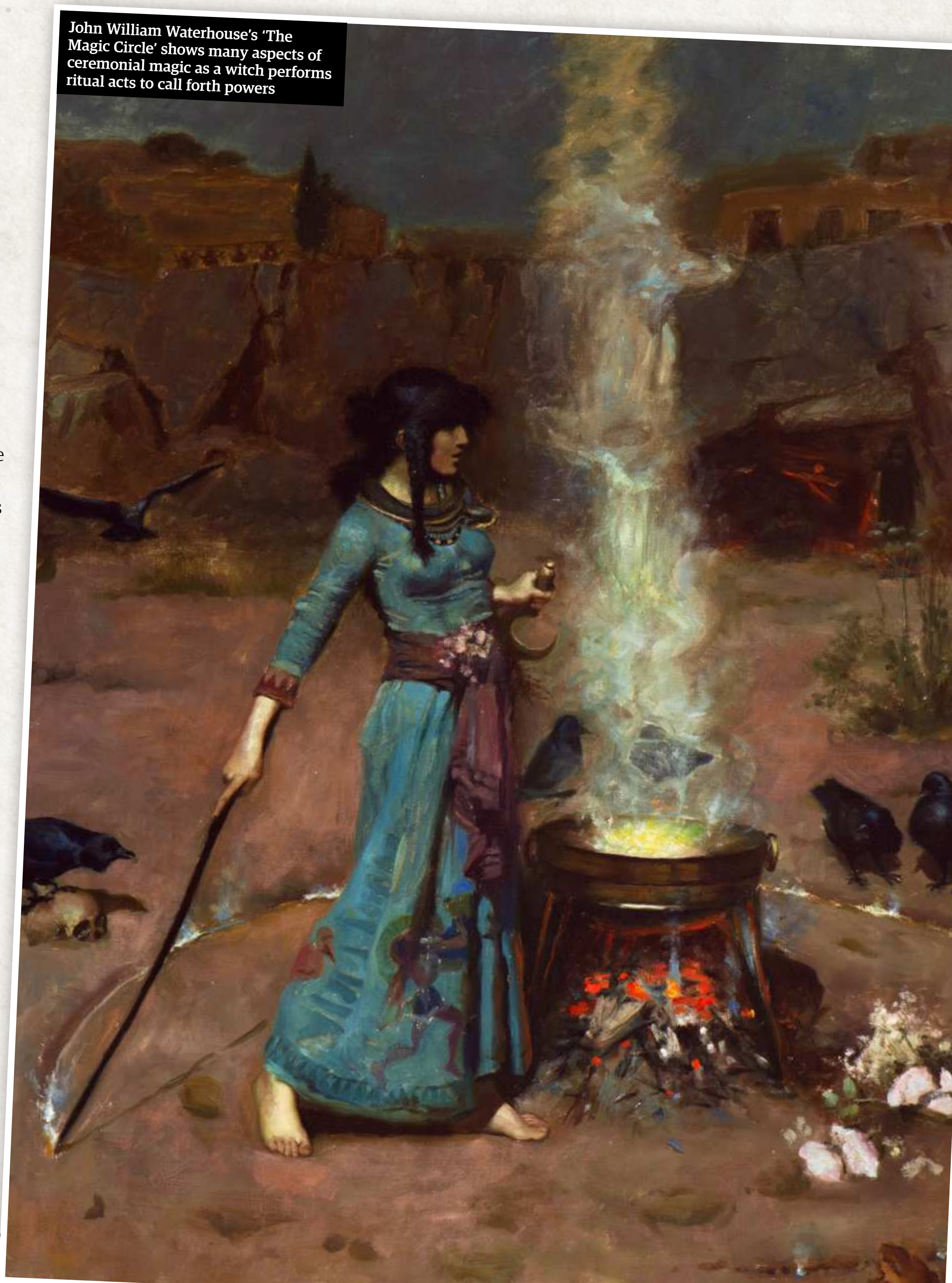
The other part of sympathetic magic is the idea of correspondence. In herbalism, if a plant resembles some part of the body then it may well be efficacious in curing ailments. The distinct similarity of a walnut to a brain meant that it was used to cure brain diseases, while any phallic-shaped root vegetable could be used to charm away impotence.

Sometimes an object can be used to represent a person too. Having a person's possession, or body part such as nail clippings, allowed magic to be targeted at the person.

Witches used dolls such as this to focus their curses onto a specific target through the use of sympathetic magic

Ceremonial magic

If you think magic is just chants and spells and hocus-pocus rites, then you are thinking of ceremonial magic



John William Waterhouse's 'The Magic Circle' shows many aspects of ceremonial magic as a witch performs ritual acts to call forth powers

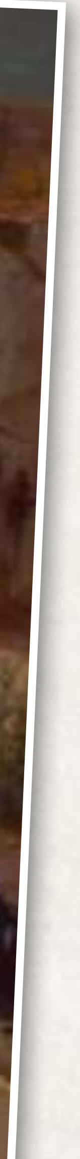
Ceremonial magic is the most familiar type of magic to those in the West. Practitioners use rituals and invocations to tap into uncanny powers. Some believed they were contacting spirits to do their bidding, while others thought that their ceremonial magic was a sort of language that allowed them to command the universe.

The origins of ceremonial magic may be written deep into our nature. Even animals can create their own simple rituals. When given treats at the same time each day, an animal may repeat whatever actions they had been performing just before the first snack fell. Though all the following feedings would happen whatever the animals did, the animals act as if their behaviour was the cause. One pigeon in an experiment always made clockwise turns in the run-up to feeding. All animals, humans included, probably have a tendency to see causal connections where none exist, and so ritual can form a powerful hold over our minds.

In many early religions, ritual was the key part of worship. For the Greeks and Romans it was the proper performance that mattered and not a person's personal relationship with the god. This meant ceremonies had to be flawless in execution - a mumbled word or slip of the tongue meant the whole ritual had to be done again. Pity poor Emperor Claudius with his stammer.

As well as the use of ceremony in ancient religion, there were folk magic practices that relied on ritual acts. In springs and wells across the Roman Empire, rolled-up pieces of lead have been discovered with curses scrawled on them. One curse tablet from London reads, "I curse Tretia Maria and her life and mind and memory and liver and lungs mixed up together, and her words, thoughts and memory."

It is from classical sources that ceremonial magic developed. In the Renaissance, everything from the ancient world was suddenly in vogue. Documents in Ancient Greek that had been lost

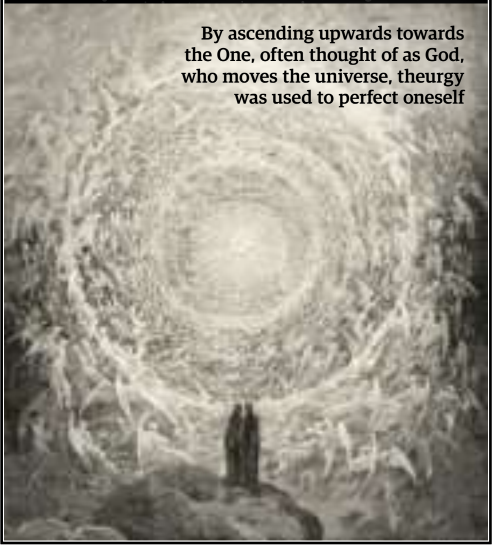


Theurgy: Unity with God

Theurgy ('Divine working') is the magical art of calling forth deities. It was thought by practitioners that by undergoing henosis – unification with the divine – they could achieve perfection. Theurgy is different from prayer in that users are not asking gods to perform acts for them; they are seeking to bring some aspect of the divine into their own soul.

The practice of theurgy derived from the beliefs of Neo-Platonist philosophers who taught that the world of physical objects was illusory. Behind all things there was a deeper spiritual realm, and beyond that there was the One, often identified as God. For the Neo-Platonist, unification with God was made possible by meditation and purification, but also through ritual. Iamblichus described how items could be used to bring one closer to the gods because all physical things were created in the likeness of divine images and were imbued the power of the gods.

Some Christian sects also found use for Theurgy. By seeking within themselves access to the divine, some early Christians believed they would be able to see the true nature of reality. In later magical traditions, talismans were used to give magicians unification with gods, to give the magic user superhuman powers, and to increase the potency of their spells.



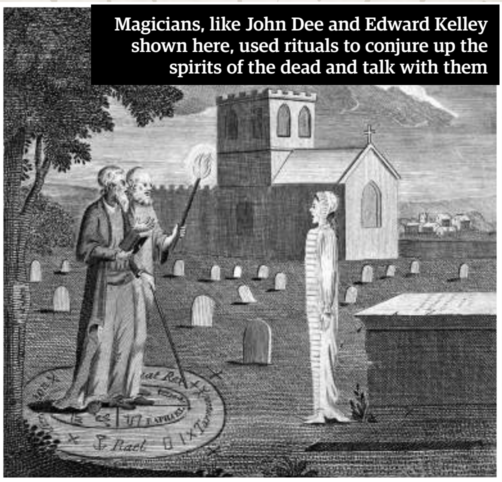
By ascending upwards towards the One, often thought of as God, who moves the universe, theurgy was used to perfect oneself

to Europe started reappearing, and offered their owners insights into vanished wisdom. In 15th century Florence, Marsilio Ficino was tasked with translating the works of Plato into Latin, but when mystical texts began appearing he delayed his philosophical work to translate those instead. This *Corpus Hermeneticum*, as the texts were called, was thought to be the work of one Hermes Trismegistus, purported to have been a contemporary of Moses.

In fact, modern scholarship dates many of the works of Hermes Trismegistus to the 2nd century CE. Whoever this Hermes was, his works exploded into European thought. Ceremonial magic became one of the passions of the age – at least among the educated. Court magicians soon became all the rage as well. By linking Hermes Trismegistus with Moses, it was also possible to avoid at least some of the opprobrium heaped on magic by the Church. Siena Cathedral even has a floor mosaic showing Hermes Trismegistus with his teachings.

From the *Hermeneticum* and other mystical sources, such as Kabbalah, developed a range of rituals created by those studying magic. In Kabbalah words, letters, and numbers all took on distinct meanings. Texts could be searched for obscure significances, which would be fed back into ceremonies. Many of the most learned people of the time devoted themselves to finding the proper ritual to gain them the power they sought. It was thought that by searching for hidden meanings in words, you could come to know the mind of the Creator.

Other acts of ceremonial magic were viewed as less innocent than the close reading of books. Some magicians tried to call up demons, converse with angels, and even unify themselves with God using the secret spells and commands they thought they had found in their readings of holy texts. The Church found many practitioners of these arts guilty of heresy, and the spread of ceremonial magic might have fed into the paranoia that fuelled the Witch Hunts that would haunt the Western world for centuries. It may have been acceptable for men like John Dee, with the protection of Queen Elizabeth I, to scry in mirrors and summon angels for knowledge, but those without patronage risked trials and execution.



Magicians, like John Dee and Edward Kelley shown here, used rituals to conjure up the spirits of the dead and talk with them

Ceremonial magic is found in a range of Esoteric traditions, but also had an influence on the practice of Wicca

Renaissance magic died out relatively quickly. Men like Paracelsus straddled two worlds as both magician and modern doctor. The failure of alchemists to make gold or of magicians to summon up armies of demons with their complex rituals meant that fewer monarchs were willing to support their endeavours. James I may have feared magical attack by witches, but his sons and grandsons had more pressing political matters to attend to. With the rise of modern science, people began to turn away from the promises of magic, as verifiable data seemed a more promising way to get results.

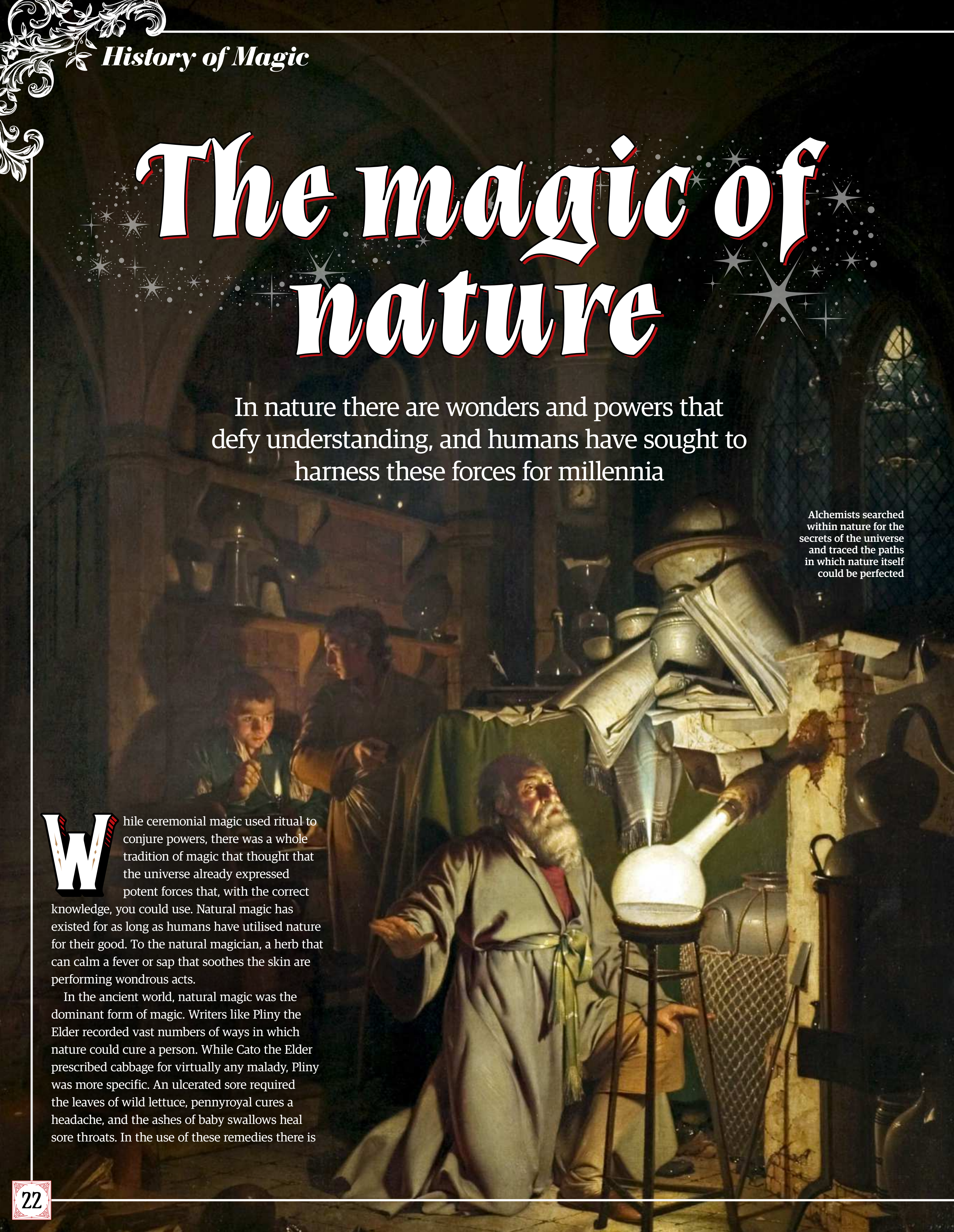
Yet ceremonial magic was not eradicated by science. The revival of using rituals to call on unnatural powers began in the 19th century. Spiritualism used the ceremony of darkened rooms and trances to call out to the dead. Societies like the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn offered to teach members the most efficient rituals to reach their goals. It was Aleister Crowley who codified many of the tools used by modern magic users. Wicca and Thelema followers can be found around the world today. Clearly people are seeking paths science is unable to set for them. Ceremonial magic has been and always will be popular because it places in users' hands powers that the uninitiated will never understand.

Perhaps there is more yet to be discovered about ceremonial magic, for users were often coy about revealing their methods. As Dion Fortune said of ceremonial magic, "Secrecy concerning practical formulae of ceremonial magic is also advisable, for if they are used indiscriminately, the virtue goes out of them."

"By searching for hidden meanings in words, you could know the mind of the Creator"

The magic of nature

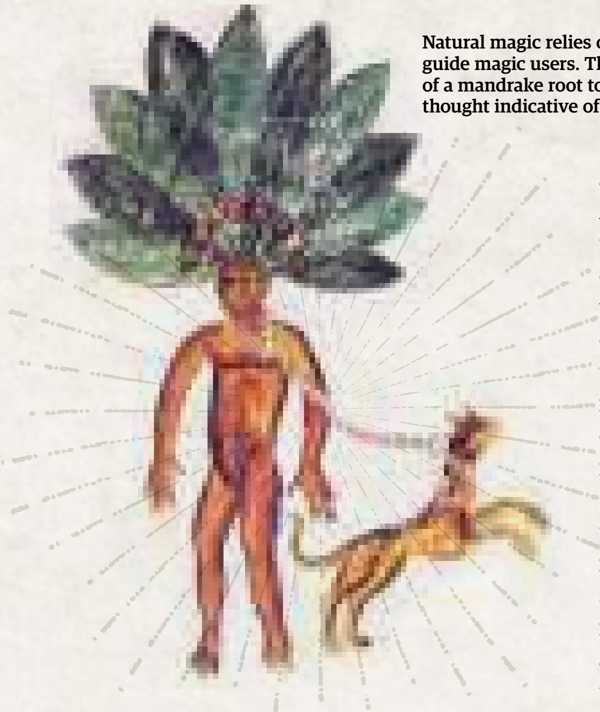
In nature there are wonders and powers that defy understanding, and humans have sought to harness these forces for millennia



Alchemists searched within nature for the secrets of the universe and traced the paths in which nature itself could be perfected

While ceremonial magic used ritual to conjure powers, there was a whole tradition of magic that thought that the universe already expressed potent forces that, with the correct knowledge, you could use. Natural magic has existed for as long as humans have utilised nature for their good. To the natural magician, a herb that can calm a fever or sap that soothes the skin are performing wondrous acts.

In the ancient world, natural magic was the dominant form of magic. Writers like Pliny the Elder recorded vast numbers of ways in which nature could cure a person. While Cato the Elder prescribed cabbage for virtually any malady, Pliny was more specific. An ulcerated sore required the leaves of wild lettuce, pennyroyal cures a headache, and the ashes of baby swallows heal sore throats. In the use of these remedies there is



Natural magic relies on nature to guide magic users. The resemblance of a mandrake root to a man was thought indicative of its powers

no need for prayer or spell-casting. The virtue of the medicines is inherent in their nature; that is natural magic.

Pliny the Elder also gives clues for how natural magic would develop over the millennia. In his chapter on honey he mentions a special summer honey. This is made in the 30 days after the solstice, when Sirius is at its most brilliant in the sky. This honey, Pliny declares, is a gift from the gods, and not much less powerful than the gods' own nectar in healing. Here we see how nature's magic can be far more complex than human ritual. Summer honey is not concerned with any hand-waving or chanting of mere mortals; it is the product of the turning of the heavens above and the divinities that dwell there.

In the Christian era, natural magic would become the acceptable face of magic. Many Christians believed that in creating the universe, God had forged a Great Chain of Being - everything was linked to both higher and lower forms in nature. Natural magicians simply had to find what the relationships were between things to use them as God intended. This often took the form of correspondences, which God had left clues to in His design for nature.

Yet while there were highly educated people searching for hints in nature for occult cures, there was another tradition that remained relatively hidden. Folk wisdom was often rooted in natural magic. For people who spent all day in the woods and fields, the natural world was far more tied to their daily existence than it is today. Cunning folk, men and women skilled in the use of herbs, could draw on the inherited wisdom of generations. Some cures were no more than hopeful guesses (it is unlikely that touching a dead man's tooth cured toothache), but others, like using willow bark to bring down fevers, led to the discovery of aspirin.

Alchemy was the favoured type of natural-magical act for those seeking wealth. The aim of alchemy was to transform base matter into gold. As well as offering a potentially profitable result, the process was filled with the mystic implication of perfecting the world by using qualities already within materials. The alchemist studied and experimented for years to achieve his goal. Their techniques of distillation, fermentation and rectification paved the way for the wisdom of this type of magic to be transformed into modern chemistry.

While ceremonial magic mostly gave way to science, it is interesting to note that natural magic was in many ways the source of modern science. Many types of divination fall into the realm of ceremonial magic, as they rely on various accoutrements and the invocation of spells to let the user peer into the future. But there are many that depend on nothing more than the observation of nature, and from these observations many scientific advances were derived. Astrologers, by the nature of their art, spent long periods staring at the night sky. By making careful note of the positions of stars for their charts they left records of comets and other phenomena that later astronomers would bring within the realm of science. It was astrologers in ancient Egypt who revealed the length of the year by studying the position of the stars as the heavens rotated.

It is easy to see how herbalism became botany. If you wished to use a plant as a cure then you needed to have been skilled at identifying it. From the folk remedies that the majority of people relied on grew modern medicine. It is easy to scoff at some of the concoctions found in ancient texts, but occasionally they do prove effective. In 2015, a 9th century Anglo-Saxon recipe for an eye salve made from garlic, onion, wine, and cow bile was found to kill MRSA bacteria resistant to the most powerful antibiotics.

It is not just plants that natural magic uses. Anything can have a resonance that gives it power over other aspects of the universe. Crystal healing can feel very modern, but in fact the study of the healing properties of stones goes back millennia. Pliny thought wearing amber was a cure for delirium, for instance. Today, practitioners can consult textbooks to determine what the correct crystals to be placed on a person to cure almost any ailment are, though scientists have yet to find any benefit from this type of natural magic.

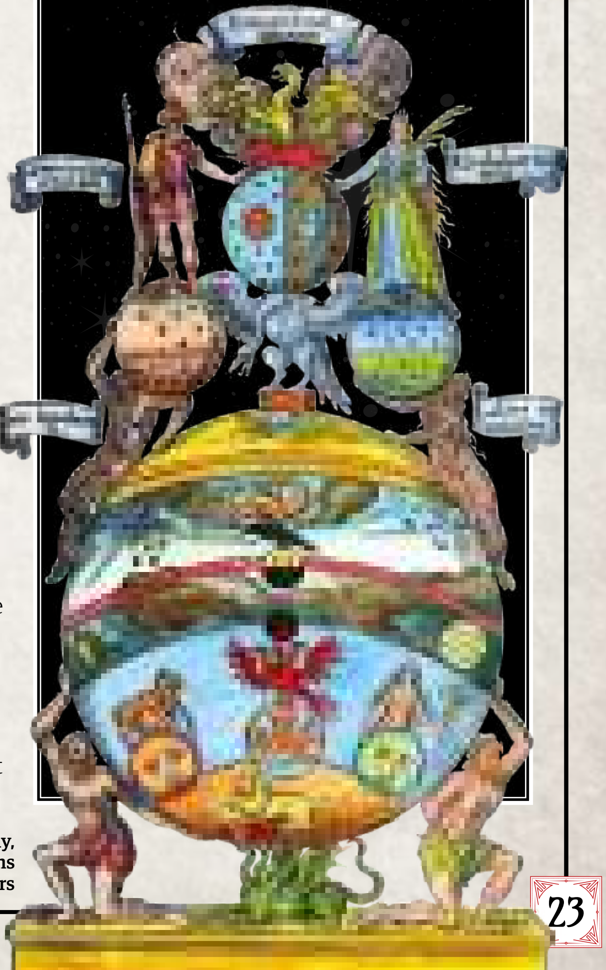
Even today, the sense of wonder in nature we experience can make it feel as if the whole universe is filled with magic. In the ancient world, many believed that rivers, seas and trees were home to spirits of nature. The whole world was alive. So the worship of nature and calling on their powers could stray from pure observation of nature to what would later become recognised as shamanism.

Correspondences: The signature of God

Natural magic relies heavily on correspondences – the belief that there is a mystical link between certain plants and stones and other concepts. Some of these rely on the doctrine of signatures, which Paracelsus taught meant 'Nature marks each growth… according to its curative benefit.' Later believers thought that God had made certain plants resemble the human body parts that they would be able to heal. For instance, the plant eyebright, with its flowers like gleaming eyes, was thought to cure all manner of eye problems.

Other correspondences are less obvious. Numbers, colours and metals can all have specific meanings in magic. Huge tables of correspondences have been constructed to inform magic users how natural objects and concepts can be related to human affairs. One such table online, under the heading 'Purification', links together juniper, amethyst, the colour white and the scent of myrrh. Someone wishing to promote purification therefore might want to incorporate some or all of these in their rite.

The idea of interconnectedness between nature and humanity is one familiar from many branches of mysticism and philosophy. One of the key concepts in Hermeticism is 'As above, so below'. By dealing with these things here below, therefore, we may influence higher powers.



The natural world can be viewed as a hierarchy, and natural magic exploits the connections between higher and lower orders

Shamanism is widely practised today. Here, a Mongolian shaman wears the traditional garb and holds the drum important to many shamanistic rituals

Shamanism

Shamans – those with the power to contact spirits – come in many types and offer many routes to spiritual realms

Shamanism has been called the 'technique of ecstasy', and is the magical art of leaving the human realm and entering a spirit world. For shamans, every facet of nature is filled with spirits. Only via training and often harrowing experiences does the shaman gain access to this other universe.

Shamanism is not a single faith, rather a tradition that can be found worldwide. Shamanism is practised by the Dukun healers of Indonesia, the Noaidi of the Sami people, the Ayahuasqueros of Peru, and in hundreds of other cultures. Linking them together is the belief that they can access a place beyond the one our normal senses can understand by using an altered state of consciousness.

The training of a shaman can take many years. In some cultures, a shaman must be called by a dream or messenger from the gods, while in others it is a social position that can be inherited. While much may be taught to a trainee shaman by their teachers, generally the final stage of initiation requires a shaman to undergo a shattering physical or psychical experience. The initiate may have to climb mountains, forgo sleep, or imbibe hallucinogens, but the end result is that they pass into the spirit world.

Altered states of mind

As part of a shaman's attempts to enter the spirit world, they may dance for hours, chant, take psychoactive substances or starve themselves. These often-tortuous rites have only one goal – to change how the shaman perceives reality.

The shamanic trance is a necessary step for shamans, as it frees them from concerns with this world and allows them to communicate with higher spirits. Altered states of consciousness can occur in various ways. Many people will have experienced meditation or the feeling of creative flow when our consciousness changes. Shamans use ritual and technique to achieve an altered state at will.

The rhythmic beating of a drum along with repetitive motions is one of the most common paths to an altered state. Shamanic drums are often beaten at 4-5 beats per second, which some researchers link to theta waves in the brain. As well as music, dancing to the point of exhaustion is another way to achieve an altered state. The Urarina people of the Peruvian Amazon use ayahuasca to make a hallucinogenic drink that helps them enter the spirit world.

The altered state that is desired by shamans can defy explanation. Most descriptions talk of changes in time perception, body image, and emotion. But the most common of all is that it is mystical and beyond words.

One of the most commonly found tools in shamanism is the drum, the beating of which may facilitate changes in consciousness

Once the shaman has passed the tests set for them, they often become focal points for a community. With their privileged access to the spirits that transcend normal human life, shamans are expected to perform services for their society. Exactly what is expected of a shaman varies greatly between cultures.

In Korean shamanism, they must pass through hinbyeong ('divine illness') before they can practise. To achieve this, the shaman must be taken over by a god or spirit, an experience that involves bodily pain and mental trauma. Once healed by fully joining with the spirit, the shaman is then qualified to perform rituals on behalf of their community. These most often involve dance and singing to bring divine assistance to humans in matters like harvests and health.

For some Native Americans, the shamans of their tribes offered ways to counter European settlers on their territory. In 1889 the Ghost Dance, a circle dance tied to tribal beliefs relating to the spirit world, was revealed in a vision to Hawthorne Wodziwob. In his vision, the spirits of the dead spoke to Wodziwob and promised their aid in driving out the white invaders. The message spread quickly. One Lakota remembered, "They told the people they could dance a new world into being. There would be landslides, earthquakes, and big winds… The earth would roll up like a carpet with all the white man's ugly things – the stinking new animals, sheep and pigs, the fences, the telegraph poles, the mines and factories." Despite the promises, the Ghost Dance did not protect those killed in the Wounded Knee Massacre.

South African shamanism is personal. Sangoma are most often called on for healing and divination by individuals. Their special role in healing comes from the folk belief that sickness is caused by spirits or spiritual pollution. The sangoma know they have been chosen for their role when they fall ill with symptoms that normal medicine cannot heal. Only with help from another sangoma can they become well and undergo the training necessary to help others. By communicating with ancestor spirits through throwing bones, dreams or trances, the sangoma will advise their clients as to what course of treatment they should receive. The spirits may also inform the sangoma on the best time and place to gather herbs so that they are at their most powerful.

Whether by helping the community as a whole or individually, shamans can play roles in every stage of a person's life. The rituals of a shaman often involve music, singing and dancing. These lend themselves to tribal participation and are social as well as spiritual events. In some cultures, it is the job of the shaman to welcome a baby into the world or to perform rituals like circumcision.

The shaman acts as a binding agent for the society by bringing all the living members of a group together, but by also linking them to the spirits of ancestors and the natural world. Even at death, a shaman may be present and called on to act as a psychopomp – one who guides a soul to the afterlife. Thus, the ties of community are not severed even by death.

Yet in discussing shamanism it is important to note that many researchers are uncomfortable with the term. For some the grouping together of such diverse cultures and practices under one term risks drawing false conclusions. Cultural critics note that the term 'shaman' is often one applied only by outsiders to a social function, and may ignore the views of the people it seeks to describe. Another take is that the idea of shamanism is one that is exploited by those who want to use it for their own good. While scholars debate definition, it is vital to look at what draws people to shamanism.

From the more traditional forms of shamanism, people have synthesised a new set of beliefs called Neoshamanism. These tend to pick and choose from the various practices of peoples around the world. There are also those, particularly in the West, who are also trying to reconnect with shamanistic traditions in their authentic settings. People may travel thousands of miles to undergo shamanic rituals that allow them to travel deeper into themselves and commune with powers outside of their daily lives. This has always been the aim of the shaman and it seems there is a constant human thirst for their wisdom.

"Working To Beat The
Alaska

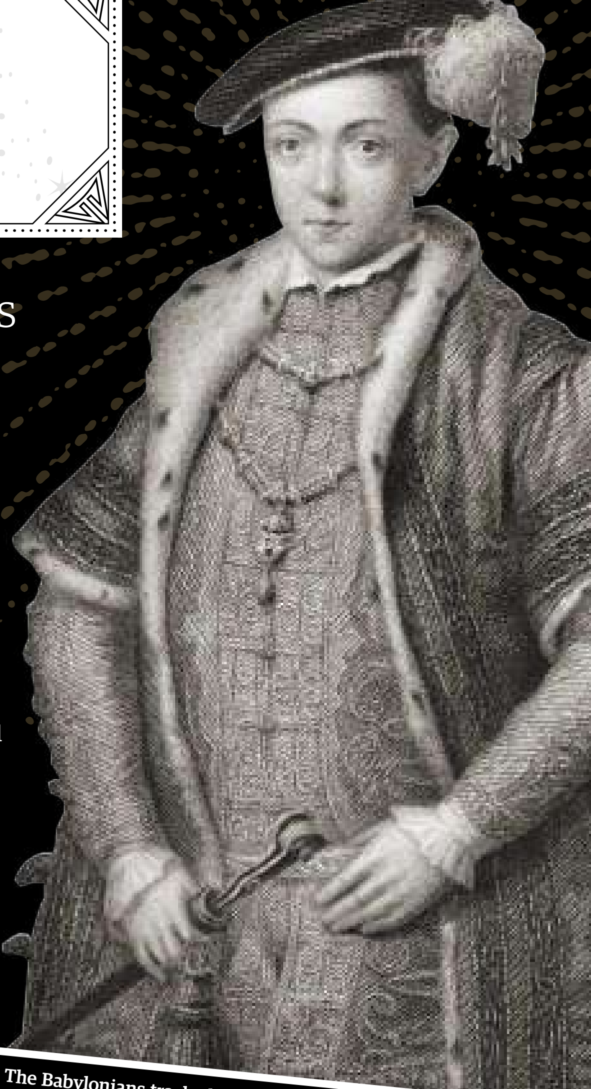
An Alaskan shaman wearing a traditional outfit. Shamans are often masked to mark their role as a mediator between worlds

© Alamy, Creative Commons; Malcolm Lidbury

Astrology

The history of divining by the movement of the stars and planets goes far beyond the horoscope page at the back of the newspaper...

Written by Poppy-Jay Palmer



Royals like King Edward VI of England had their own personal horoscope writers on hand

Astrology, or the study of the movements of celestial objects as a means for predicting human affairs, is easily the most widely used of all the divinatory arts. With garish horoscopes adorning newspapers and ad spaces every day, it's not hard to see why. To many, modern astrology might seem like a load of nonsense, but it has a rich past, with its roots in calendrical systems firmly planted in different cultures all over the world.

Throughout history, and in many cultures, astrology has been widely trusted as a divining method. It was extremely common in academic circles, almost indistinguishable from astronomy, and used in alchemy, meteorology and medicine. But that changed in the 20th century when people began to doubt its accuracy. It rapidly lost its academic and theoretical standing and is now regarded by many as a pseudoscience.

For many years, astrology has been making an impact all over the world. One of the first civilisations to track celestial activity as a means of divination was that of the Babylonians, with a record of the astronomical observations of Venus (known as the Venus tablet of Ammisaduqa) being compiled around 1700 BCE. More areas started using similar methods from that point on, including the rest of Mesopotamia, ancient China, ancient Greece and Hellenistic Egypt. Each version of astrology brought with it new elements and new ways of dissecting the sky.

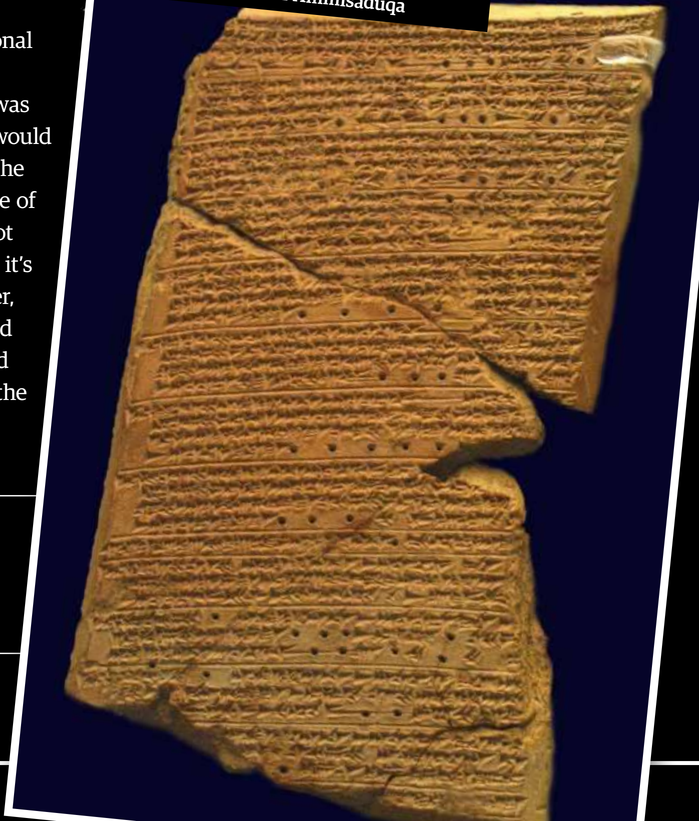
Astrology's use as a divining art has been dated back to at least the second millennium BCE

In the medieval world, astrology slowly morphed into something more sophisticated. Islamic, Hindu and European astrology inspired books on the subject. But, as with every divinatory art, the practice inadvertently encouraged objectors, and caused many public figures to argue against it in dissertations, or simply flat-out denounce it.

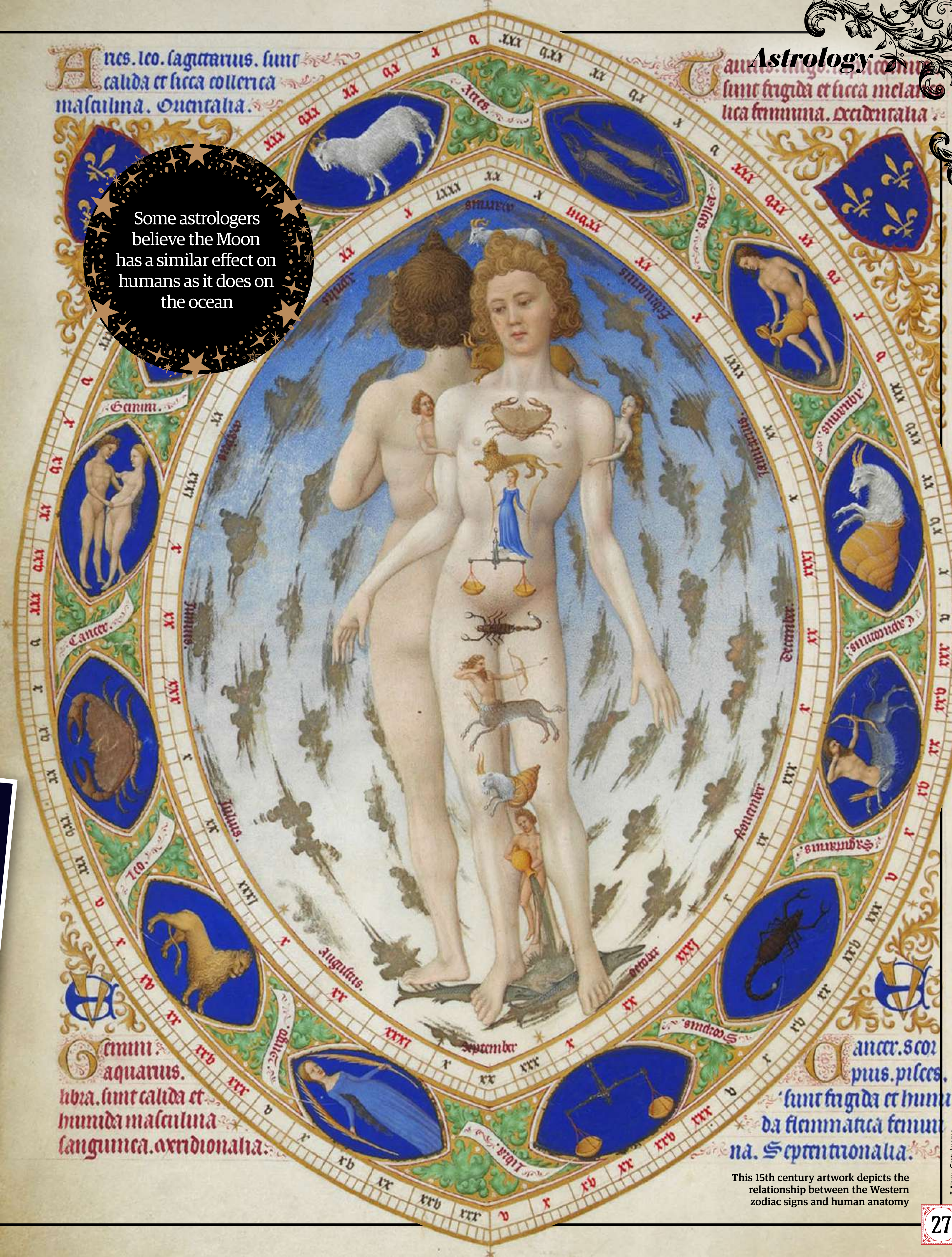
During the Renaissance, scholars continued to study and practice astrology. Royals like King Edward VI of England and Queen Elizabeth I kept their own personal horoscope writers for predictions. Astrology was so heavily trusted that it would often be used to determined the best time to plant crops. With the Age of Enlightenment, astrology finally lost a lot of its standing as an exact science. Now, it's often viewed as a bit of a laugh. However, recent surveys have revealed that around 25 per cent of Americans, Canadians and Britons still believe that the position of the stars and planets can have an effect on their lives.

"Royals kept their own personal horoscope writers for predictions"

The Babylonians tracked the astronomical observations of Venus with what is known as the Venus tablet of Ammisaduqa



Some astrologers believe the Moon has a similar effect on humans as it does on the ocean


Aries. leo. sagittarius. sunt calida et sicca collerica masculina. Orientalia.
sunt frigida et sicca melancolica feminina. Occidentalia.
Aries
Taurus
Gemini
Cancer
Leo
Virgo
Libra
Scorpius
Sagittarius
Capricornus
Aquarius
Pisces
Gemini. aquarius. libra. sunt calida et humida masculina sanguinea. meridionalia.
Cancer. scorpius. pisces. sunt frigida et humida flemmatica feminina. Septentrionalia.

This 15th century artwork depicts the relationship between the Western zodiac signs and human anatomy

© Alamy, Getty Images

Thoth, magic, and Hermes Trismegistus

A mythical figure. An ancient prophet. The figure of Hermes Trismegistus is shrouded in mystery, but where did the founder of Hermeticism really come from?

Written by Dee Dee Chainey

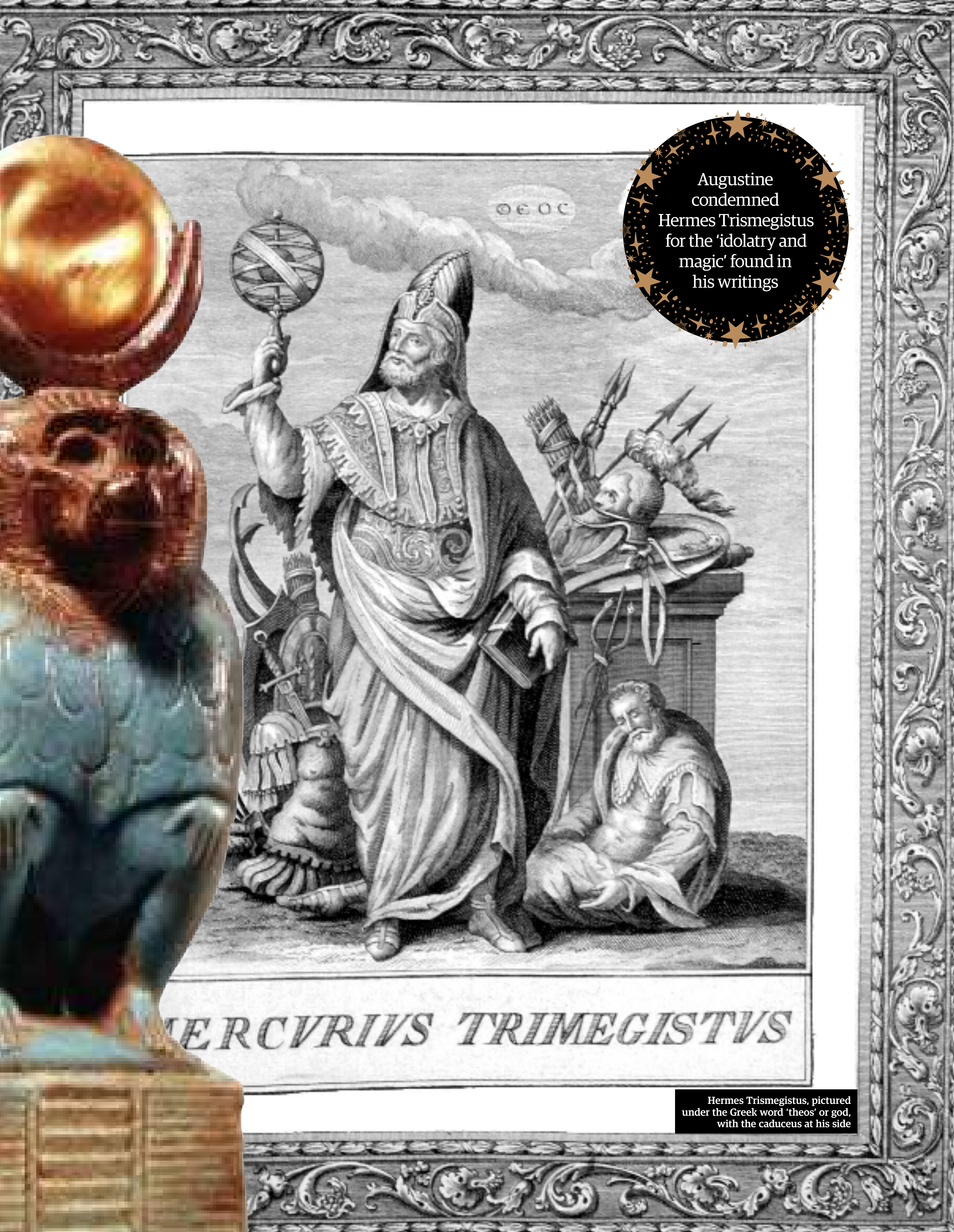
The Egyptian god Thoth depicted as a baboon, now located in the Louvre (Paris)

Hermes Trismegistus is a mystical figure, revered by many as an ancient prophet, who shared his knowledge of alchemy and the occult sciences through his writings in the ancient world. To uncover the truth of this figure, we must look back, to the furthest reaches of ancient Egyptian myth, to draw together the seeds of the legends that became a man.

Ritual and religion pervaded every part of life in Ancient Egypt. A plethora of exotic and unusual gods and goddesses made up their diverse pantheon, worshipped as masters of the natural world. While gods were many, worship in this ancient religion focused on the king as an intermediary between the people and the divine, yet ancient texts hidden for centuries in tombs and secreted underground have now been unearthed. These texts show how people beseeched the gods and gave offerings up to them, to ask for their blessing and help in all things. These gods ruled over natural phenomena, the astral bodies, and aspects of daily life. Each deity was seen as an unknowable force, so depicted symbolically in ancient art, with different animals, objects and signs to represent these characteristics, and convey the true nature of the god. During the Middle Kingdom golden age, Osiris the god of the dead was one of the most important deities of the pantheon. Others included Isis, who offered help to the dead, and ruled magical healing and protection. She is linked with baking, weaving and brewing. Associated with the sky, Horus was a falcon-headed god, with the Moon as his left eye, and the Sun as his right. Linked with Horus, and too having the falcon as a symbol is Ra, a creator god, who would travel across the sky each day in his barge, carrying the Sun; at night he would travel to the underworld, hence explaining darkness to everyone who knew this myth.

From the Old Kingdom (c. 3700 to 2150 BCE) onwards, Thoth was a god of wisdom, writing and hieroglyphs, as well as knowledge

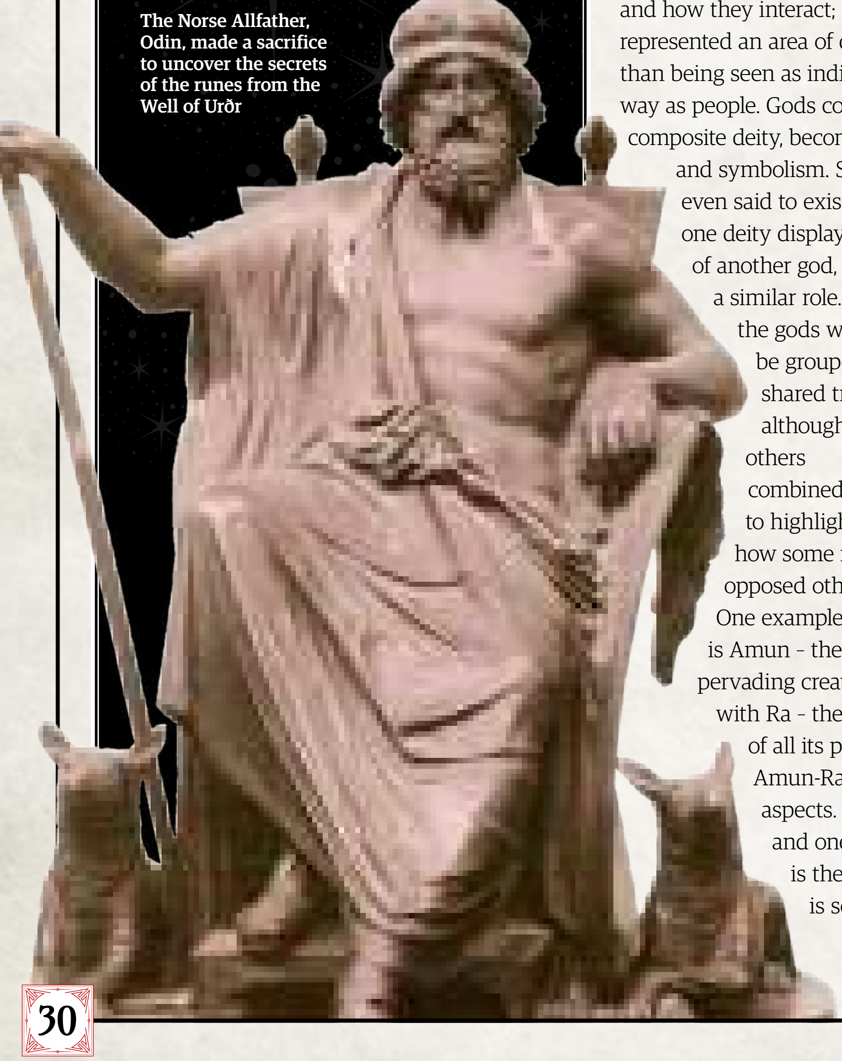
Augustine condemned Hermes Trismegistus for the 'idolatry and magic' found in his writings


ΘΕΟC
MERCVRIVS TRIMEGISTVS

Hermes Trismegistus, pictured under the Greek word 'theos' or god, with the caduceus at his side

Gods of writing and magic

Gods of words and writing are often also gods of magic. Up until the Greek culture pervaded Egyptian life, writing and literacy were considered secret knowledge kept only for priests and scribes. Thoth was often considered to have created writing and languages as the scribe of the gods, a responsibility shared with the goddess Seshat; seen as the 'lord of books', he was a powerful word-smith. Many gods linked to the art of writing are also gods of magic. Odin, the chief god of Norse mythology, was a god of wisdom, healing and magic, and credited with uncovering the wisdom of the runes. He was said to practise the secret art of seiðr magic and sorcery, and was the god who uncovered the wisdom of the runes by hanging himself from the branches of the World Tree, Yggdrasil. He also pierced himself with a spear as a sacrifice, in order to call up the runes from the well of the Norns (or Fates). Runes formed the alphabet used by the Vikings for writing magical charms, once more showing a link between writing, moving between the worlds, and magic – the same powers wielded by Thoth.



The Norse Allfather, Odin, made a sacrifice to uncover the secrets of the runes from the Well of Urðr

> "Gods could be combined into a composite deity"

and calculations, and was very much thought to maintain equilibrium within the universe. Said to stand at the side of Ra's solar barge as it travelled across the sky, his wife Maāt stood on the opposing side. Thoth played an important role in Egyptian mythology, and while his worship was most prominent in the city of Khemenu – called Hermopolis by the Greeks, the City of Hermes or the City of the Sun God – he was worshipped in many areas of Egypt. The figure of Thoth developed greatly over time, and he later became a mediator between the deities, overseeing battles between good and evil, as well as becoming associated with magic, religion, philosophy and science, and was credited with giving movement to the astral bodies.

The role of the gods in ancient Egypt differs somewhat to gods in other traditions. The Egyptians did not just tell stories to explain the world, but expressed their views of the reality through the relationship between divine forces and how they interact; enter the gods. Each deity represented an area of divinity or force, rather than being seen as individual entities in the same way as people. Gods could be combined into a composite deity, becoming an amalgam of forces and symbolism. Sometimes one god was even said to exist within another deity, when one deity displayed the tendencies of another god, or took on a similar role. Often the gods would be grouped by shared traits, although others combined to highlight how some forces opposed others. One example of this is Amun – the invisible all-pervading creator – being combined with Ra – the god of the Sun and source of all its power and energy – to create Amun-Ra, who bridged both of these aspects. Thoth is linked to the Moon, and one specific aspect of himself is the moon god Iah-Djehuty; he is sometimes depicted with a crescent moon and lunar disk on his head because of this association. In this form, he appears as a man with the head of an ibis, with a focus of commanding times and seasons. He takes the head of a baboon when his focus is equilibrium and balance, as the god Āān. As Sheps he takes the head of a hawk; as Mendes the head of a bull. When depicted in more general terms, he takes the form of an ibis entirely. He is seen as a self-created god, who calculated the creation of the heavens, and indeed as the tongue and very heart of Ra: directing the solar barge across the skies, giving Ra mental reasoning and the speech with which to enact his will.

> One of the roles of Thoth was as a secretary to Ra in the underworld

By the 12th century BCE, Egypt had faced centuries of unrest and battle against the Hittites, and political chaos ensued. It never truly regained its strength. A wave of Hellenisation reached the shores of Egypt by the end of the 4th century BCE, after the conquest of Alexander the Great. The Egyptian people resisted as Ptolemy, a Macedonian Greek general, was instated as king, modelling himself on the Egyptian pharaohs of old. The new Greek ideals entering the country after the conquest had a profound impact on Egyptian religious life. King Ptolemy I introduced the worship of new gods in order to unify the two opposing traditions of the Egyptian people and their Greek rulers; called interpretatio Graeca, Greek gods and myths were equated with those of other religions as an easy way to understand the invading culture. This was easily accepted by the Egyptians, who were already used to combining their deities as one. The Egyptian Osiris and Apis grew into the new 'Serapis', a figure joining Greek appearance and Egyptian religious ideas. This god was used as a poster-boy figure for this Greek integration, as the king took a pre-existing belief and capitalised on it, morphing the god into an amalgam of the two, and spreading this worship throughout Egypt for his own ends. The Ancient Egyptian god Thoth did not escape this fate, as he was too a victim of this attempt at

integration. Thoth became associated with the Greek god Hermes, as the two ruled over similar forces in the universe.

Hermes was the Greek god of travellers, doorways, boundaries and their transgression, as well as herds, sleep and gymnastics, yet he is most famously known for being an emissary and messenger of the gods. Thoth has also been called a messenger; while some downplay this role and focus on his aspect as a scribe, it is understandable why some would equate the concepts of messenger and acting as an intermediary, particularly with both figures grounded in diplomacy and equilibrium. Hermes is usually depicted with a cap, winged boots, a kērykeion, caduceus or herald's staff as a symbol of peace, often wearing a robe or cape, only later developing into the naked youth we know today. Strangely, Hermes was also known for magic, as his helmet was said to conceal him, and it was he who gave a magical plant to Odysseus to protect him from Circe. In the Hellenistic period, after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, Hermes grew in popularity, and his feats became embellished and even more celebrated. Some have suggested that, as emissary and messenger, the god was viewed as able to mediate between worlds, the seen and unseen, and because of this his sphere of influence might have extended to divination and magic - like the Egyptian god Thoth.

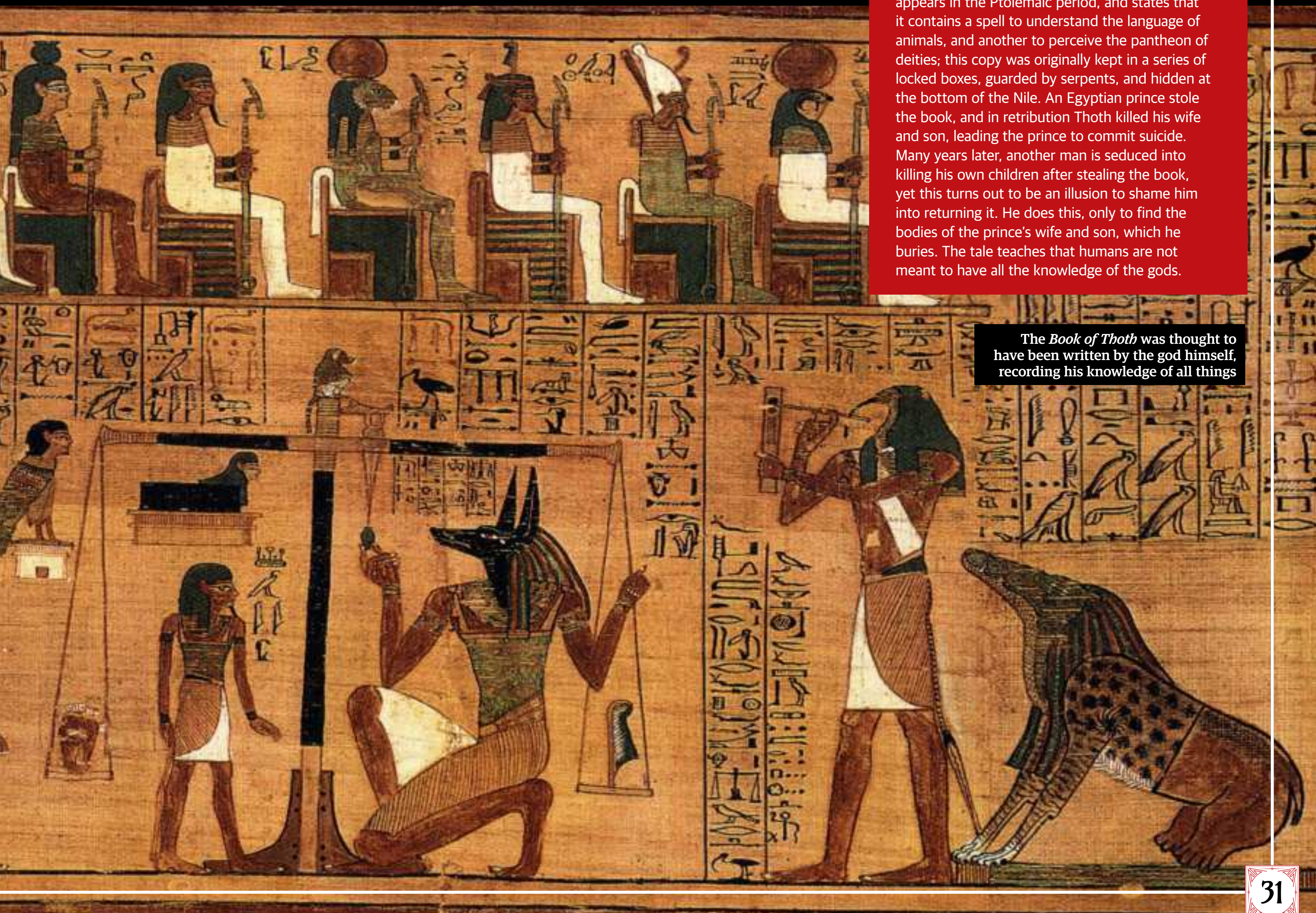
> In the Egyptian creation myth, Thoth adds five days to the year, allowing Geb and Nut to procreate, and birth more gods

Soon, the two gods had been completely conflated through interpretatio Graeca, and seen as one god. By the mid 1st century CE, Thoth was often referred to as 'Thrice Great', stemming from the Egyptian idea of composite deities with many aspects. While the exact meaning of 'Thrice Great' is still unknown, we can understand

The mysterious Book of Thoth

The *Book of Thoth* was said to have been written by the god himself. The 'book' is thought to have actually been a collection of texts, 42 books, in six categories, that were said to contain all of the philosophical knowledge of the Egyptian people. The work is referred to by Clement of Alexandria at the end of the second century CE, who attributes the works to Hermes. The books were thought to have been translated into Greek, and updated with Greek ideals. It's said that books covered the laws, deities and priestly instruction; instructions for how to serve the gods; knowledge of the geography of the world and writing; astrology and astronomy; religious compositions; and, finally, knowledge of medicine. While some have tried to include the *Book of the Dead* as part of the *Book of Thoth*, this was never accepted by the majority since he is only credited with writing part of it.

An account of a fictional *Book of Thoth* appears in the Ptolemaic period, and states that it contains a spell to understand the language of animals, and another to perceive the pantheon of deities; this copy was originally kept in a series of locked boxes, guarded by serpents, and hidden at the bottom of the Nile. An Egyptian prince stole the book, and in retribution Thoth killed his wife and son, leading the prince to commit suicide. Many years later, another man is seduced into killing his own children after stealing the book, yet this turns out to be an illusion to shame him into returning it. He does this, only to find the bodies of the prince's wife and son, which he buries. The tale teaches that humans are not meant to have all the knowledge of the gods.

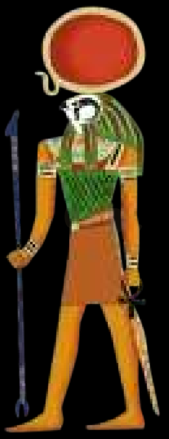


The *Book of Thoth* was thought to have been written by the god himself, recording his knowledge of all things

Meet the gods of Egypt

Almost 1,500 deities are known by name and many of them combine with each other and share characteristics. Here are some of the most important

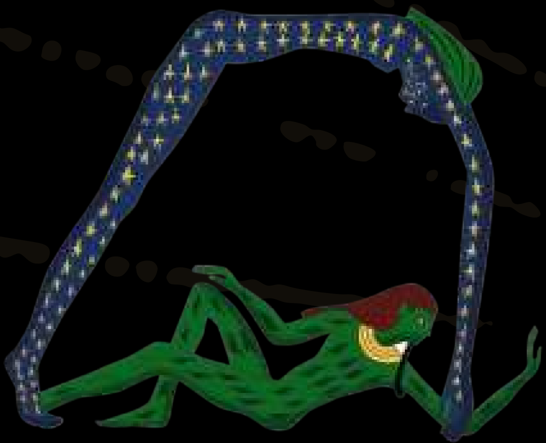
To the Egyptians, writing was sacred as it gave reliability, and enabled all knowledge of the world to be recorded



Ra

God of the Sun

Ra was Egypt's most important Sun god, also known as Khepri when rising, Atum when setting and the Aten as the solar disc. As the main creator deity, Ra also produced twin gods Shu and Tefnut.



Geb

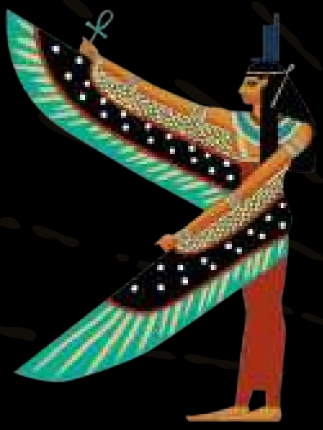
God of the Earth

As the grandson of Ra and the son of Shu and Tefnut, green-skinned Geb represented the Earth and was usually shown reclining, stretched out beneath his sister-wife Nut.

Nut

Goddess of the sky

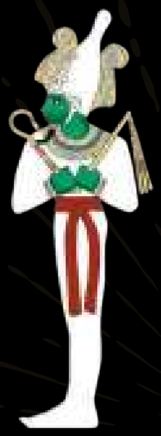
As granddaughter of Ra, Nut was the sky goddess whose star-spangled body formed the heavens, held above her brother Geb by their father Shu, god of air.



Isis

Goddess of motherhood and magic

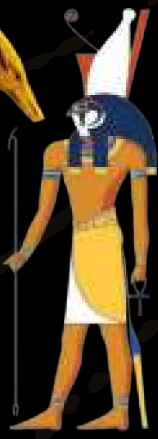
The daughter of Geb and Nut, Isis was the perfect mother who eventually became Egypt's most important deity, 'more clever than a million gods' and 'more powerful than 1,000 soldiers'.



Osiris

God of resurrection and fertility

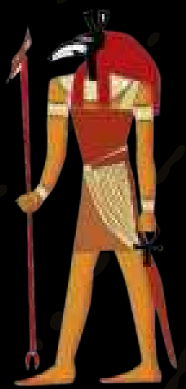
Isis's brother-husband Osiris was killed by his brother Seth, only to be resurrected by Isis to become Lord of the Underworld and the god of new life and fertility.



Horus

God of Kingship

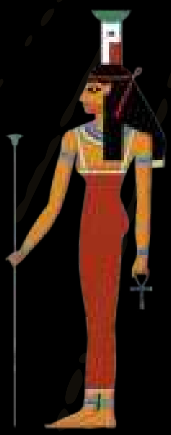
When his father Osiris became Lord of the Underworld, Horus succeeded him as king on Earth, and became the god with whom every human pharaoh was then identified.



Seth

God of storms and chaos

Represented as a composite mythical creature, Seth was a turbulent god who killed his brother Osiris, only to be defeated by Osiris's son and avenger Horus, helped by Isis.



Nephthys

Goddess of protection

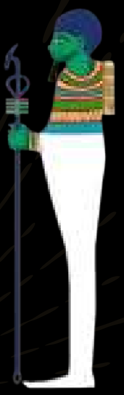
As fourth child of Geb and Nut, Nephthys was partnered with her brother Seth, but most often accompanied her sister Isis as twin protectors of the king and of the dead.

The animal cults of ancient Egypt

The Egyptians greatly respected the natural world, particularly animals whose spirits were worshipped as divine. With Egypt's earliest known art representing animals alongside humans, various creatures were placed in human burials as early as c. 4000 BCE, and the relationship was a fundamental part of Egypt's evolving religion.

Gods could be portrayed entirely as an animal, or in human (anthropomorphic) form with an animal's head, as imitated by masked priests. Many deities also had a sacred creature, which was worshipped in life then mummified at death.

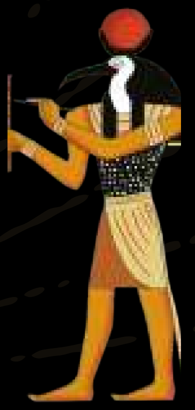
The most important of these was the Apis Bull of Memphis. Believed to house the soul of the creator god Ptah when alive, it was then worshipped as the underworld god Osiris after its death when the next bull was selected to continue the cycle. Other sacred bulls and cows were worshipped elsewhere in Egypt, with other animal cults including the sacred crocodiles of Sobek, representing the power of the king, and the sacred rams of the creator god Khnum. There were also the ibis and baboons representing the god Thoth, and the cats sacred to the feline deity Bastet. Such creatures were mummified in their millions as physical manifestations of the divine and symbols of Egypt's devotion to its creatures.



Ptah

God of creation and craftsmen

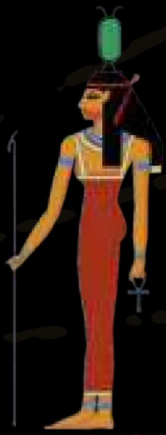
Ptah was a creator god and patron of craftsmen whose temple at Memphis, known as the 'House of Ptah's Soul' – 'hut-ka-ptah' – is the origin of the word 'Egypt'.



Thoth

God of learning and the Moon

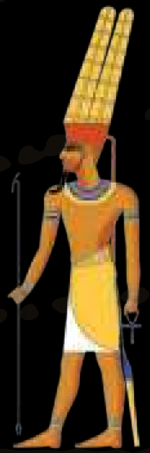
As the ibis-headed god of wisdom and patron of scribes, Thoth invented writing and brought knowledge to humans. His curved beak represented the crescent moon, and his main cult centre was Hermopolis.



Neith

Goddess of creation

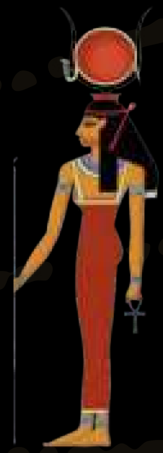
As a primeval creator deity represented by her symbol of crossed arrows and shield, warlike Neith, 'Mistress of the Bow', was worshipped at her cult centre Sais in the Delta.



Amun

God of Thebes

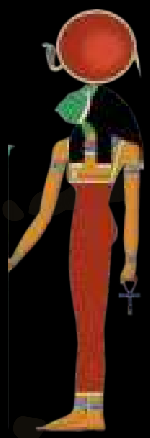
Initially the local god of Thebes, whose name means 'the hidden one', Amun was combined with the Sun god Ra to become Amun-Ra, king of the gods and Egypt's state deity.



Hathor

Goddess of love, beauty and motherhood

Often represented as a cow or a woman with cow ears, Hathor symbolised pleasure and joy and as a nurturing deity protected both the living and the dead.

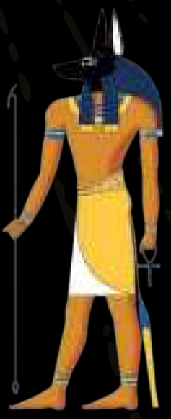


Sekhmet

Goddess of destruction

The lioness goddess Sekhmet controlled the forces of destruction and was the protector of the king in battle. Her smaller, more kindly form was Bastet the cat goddess, protector of the home.

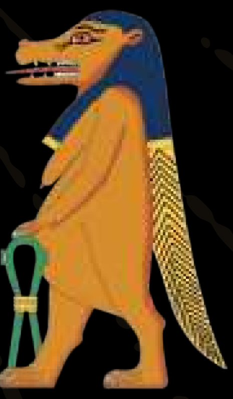
> "Gods could be portrayed in animal or human form, or as a human with an animal's head"



Anubis

God of embalming and the dead

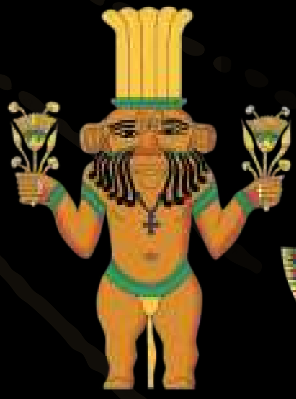
The black jackal god Anubis was the guardian of cemeteries and god of embalming, who helped judge the dead before leading their souls into the afterlife.



Taweret

Goddess of the home and childbirth

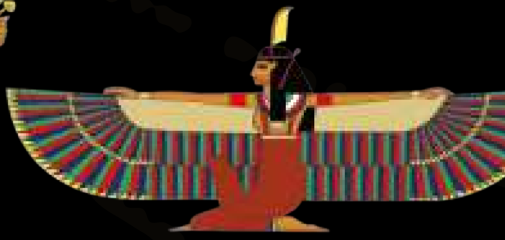
Taweret was a knife-wielding hippopotamus goddess who guarded the home, a protector of women and children who was invoked during childbirth to scare away evil forces.



Bes

God of the home and childbirth

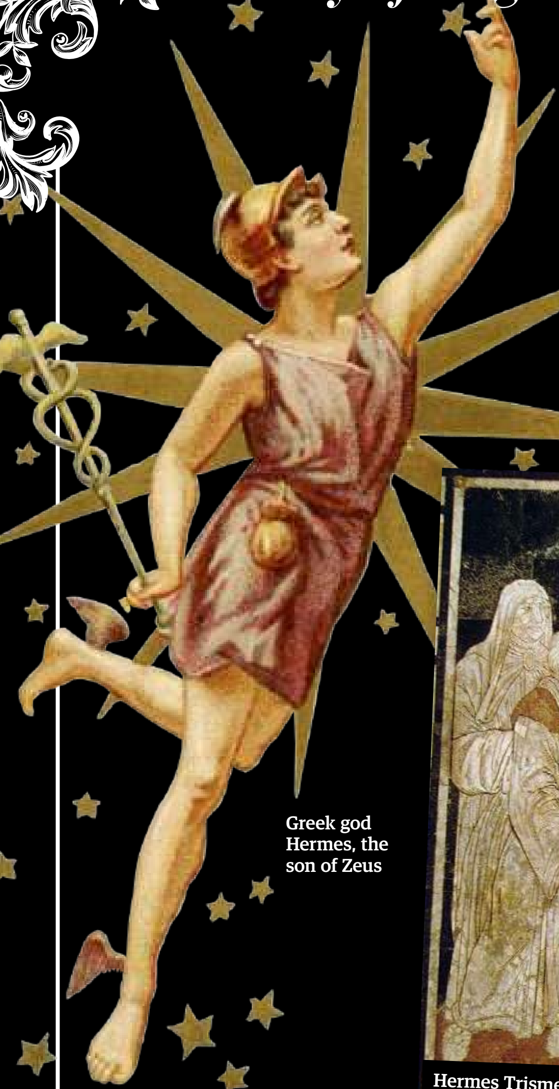
Bes was a dwarf-like god of the household who protected women and children alongside Taweret. Like her carrying knives for protection, in his case he carried musical instruments for pleasure.



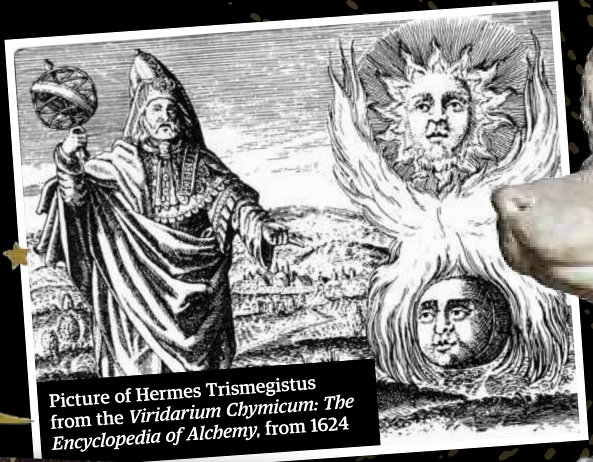
Maat

Goddess of truth and justice

As the deity who kept the universe in balance, Maat's symbol was an ostrich feather against which the hearts of the dead were weighed and judged in order to achieve eternal life.



Greek god Hermes, the son of Zeus



Picture of Hermes Trismegistus from the *Viridarium Chymicum: The Encyclopedia of Alchemy*, from 1624

Hermes Trismegistus is depicted on the floor of the Cathedral of Siena in Italy

Hermanubis combined psychopomps Hermes and Anubis, resulting in a god of truth and the priesthood

Thoth's importance as the personification of the mind of god, and the god who organises and directs all governing forces of the known universe; the veneration of this god was some of the greatest in the land, and might go some way to explaining such a grand epithet. Most attribute the first instances of this name as appearing in the writings of Athenagoras of Athens and in a fragment from Philo of Byblos, while others take this back to Egyptian cult texts from the 2nd century BCE. Through this three-fold aspect of Thoth, and his association with Hermes, the composite – and more complex – figure of Hermes Trismegistus was born. The 10th century *Suda*, a Byzantine encyclopaedia, explains that Hermes was given the name of Trismegistus because there is one divine nature within the trinity; we can view this in a similar way to how Christianity has the divine trilogy of God, Jesus and the Holy Ghost, who are all separate yet integral.

Hermes Trismegistus was patron of philosophy, alchemy, magic and astrology, and credited as the instigator of one the most mystical philosophies known to date. Historically, many considered Hermes Trismegistus to be an actual figure: a wise prophet, a contemporary of Abraham. Only one thing is for certain, the figure of Hermes Trismegistus is shrouded in mystery, yet credited with passing down sacred and ritual knowledge. Some say he wandered the lands of Egypt before even the time of Moses. Others believed that he was a contemporary of Abraham, passing on sacred knowledge to him. Others considered him one of a long line of prophets, passing on the one truth - the prisca theologia - from God, in the same vein as the Persian Zoroaster, and some believe he is an ancestor of the Prophet Muhammad himself.

Hermes Trismegistus was believed to be the author of countless texts conveying ancient

> Alchemy was the study of how to turn one substance, like base metals, into another – for instance, gold.

wisdom. Many say he is the author of the 42 books previously credited to Thoth, while Plato mentioned a hall containing 9,000 years of ancient wisdom at the Temple of Neith, at Sais in the Nile Delta. Some of these texts are collectively referred to as the *Hermetica*, which detailed knowledge of magic, the universe and the mind, in the form of a dialogue between a master and student - indeed the master was Hermes Trismegistus himself. This body of work became the basis of Hermeticism, dealing with magical plants and gemstones, making talismans, summoning spirits, with astrology and the drawing down of the stars. One of the most important of the *Hermetica* texts was the *Asclepius*, which explained how to trap demons and spirits inside statues, while his *Poimandres* from the *Corpus Hermeticum* detailed the creation of the world by the Son of God, known as the Word, reminiscent of the biblical Genesis.

Crowley's Thoth tarot deck

The Thoth tarot was a deck published by Ordo Templi Orientis in 1969, after both of the creators had passed away. Painted by Lady Frieda Harris, based on mystical instructions from Aleister Crowley, and paired with his book on the deck, *The Book of Thoth*, written between 1938 and 1943. The depictions on each of the cards are inspired by various mystical systems, as well as philosophy and science, in an attempt to reinvigorate and reinterpret the traditional meanings, as is encouraged for all initiates to the Order of the Golden Dawn as part of their spiritual journey. Crowley changed many of the Major Arcana names, as well as renaming pages to princesses, and knights to princes in the Court Cards. Another major difference in the deck is that he modified the corresponding Hebrew letters and astrological associations of the cards, based on his own reading of their symbolism in line with his teaching in his *Book of the Law*. He also gave a title to each of the Minor Arcana cards. While the accompanying book is meant to act somewhat as an instruction manual, Crowley's deck is infamous for its mystic nature and inaccessibility for the uninitiated. A modified version of the deck, including two original cards by Lady Frieda Harris but rejected by Crowley, is still available from U.S. Games Systems.

The Thoth tarot deck is still incredibly popular with people today, seen to hold great divinatory wisdom

These texts are generally thought to originate between 100 to 300 CE, and can be divided into two types: those dealing with philosophy, and those dealing with magic. Hermeticism focused on using magico-religious practices to transcend the constraints of the physical body. These teachings became popular through the Hellenistic period, linked to Platonism and Stoicism, with an element of Jewish and Persian influences, and saw a revival with the alchemy of the Middle Ages, right through to the Renaissance.

Various legends about the comings and goings of Hermes Trismegistus have been developed over the centuries. Some say that Hermes Trismegistus appeared in Islamic literature, in the form of the prophet Idris, with his writing being recorded by Ikhwan al-Safa, a secret society of Muslim philosophers translated as 'The Brethren of Purity'. Others go so far as to claim that he travelled from Egypt to visit advanced races living in outer space, and even to Heaven itself, before returning to Earth; he is also credited with building the pyramids at Giza. The Emerald Tablet sheds light on these beliefs, as it is seen as one of the foundations of Hermetic practice written by Hermes Trismegistus himself. The tablet is associated with the secret of the prima materia and the Philosopher's Stone.

Although the origin of the tablet is murky, many believe it is another example of a source credited with being older than it actually is, and in reality the first reference to it is an Arabic text dating to between the 6th and 8th centuries BCE: *The Book of Balinas the Wise on the Causes*. Legend tells that the tablet was found in the arms of a corpse, seated on a golden throne under a statue of Hermes in Tyana. The tablet was not translated into Latin until the 12th century BCE, and a translation was found amongst Isaac Newton's papers, and it was picked up extensively by later mystical scholars.

While the belief that the texts - and indeed the figure of Hermes Trismegistus - were ancient, an analysis by Isaac Casaubon in the 17th century examined the language used, and revealed that these were indeed much later than believed and could not have been written by the mystical prophet. This opinion has since been challenged by many.

In conclusion, it seems that the texts attributed to the ancient prophet were Egyptian-Greek texts written by multiple authors from the first and second century CE and after, incorporating beliefs and texts from much earlier Egyptian traditions linked to the god Thoth, and indeed updated to incorporate Greek ideas, initially for the political aim of social integration and the acceptance of a new branch of rulers in Egypt. The figure of Hermes Trismegistus did indeed act as a much needed historical basis for the tradition, and drew together the disparate ideas, neatly packaging them as a coherent belief system with a central figure. While the validity of Hermes Trismegistus and his writings are highly questionable, and an absolute falsehood for most scholars, there is certainly no doubt that his influence has reached far and wide, across continents and across history, to capture the imaginations of many, and create a mystical tradition that countless people still adhere to today.

> The macrocosm-microcosm theory teaches that the 'part reflects the whole' throughout the cosmos - 'as above, so below'

Ptolemy I Soter depicted as the Pharaoh of Egypt, now in the British Museum, London

© Alamy, Getty Images, Joe Cummings, Kym winters, Creative Commons; Roland Unger, Einsamer Schütze

Haruspicy

People see signs in everything, including animal entrails. The Ancient Romans searched through the bodies of sacrificed animals to see what the future held…

Written by Poppy-Jay Palmer

The ancient Etruscans developed an advanced civilisation in Italy before the Roman Empire, possessing sophisticated forms of art and culture, and it was no different when it came to divination. One practice that became popular with the ancient Estruscans was haruspicy. In fact, it was so popular that, as with art and culture, it eventually made its way to ancient Rome.

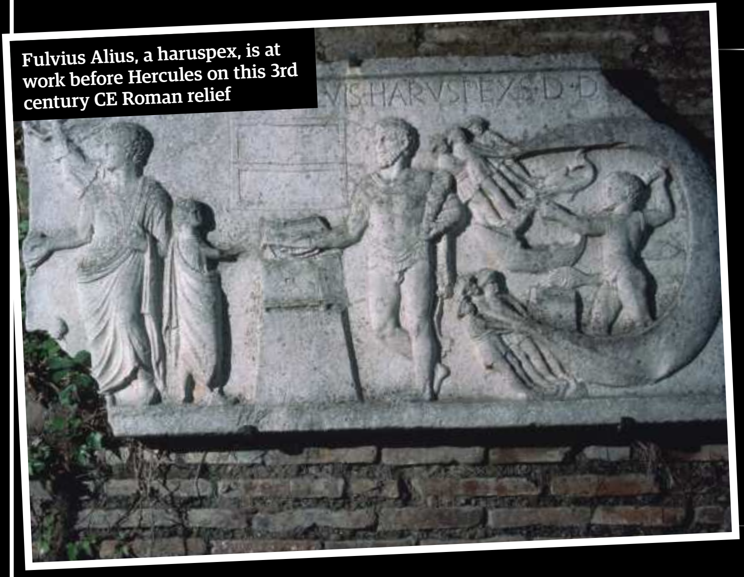
With the practice tracing all the way back to at least the third millennium BCE, a haruspex, someone trained in haruspicy, could predict the future by reading omens found in the entrails of animals like sheep and poultry. To interpret the divine, they would ritually slaughter livestock as a sacrifice, butcher it, examine the size, shape, colour and markings of the animal's internal organs, primarily the liver but also the gall bladder, heart and lungs, and then roast the meat to share in a sacred meal with celebrants. The sacrifice usually took place during ceremonies where the Sun god could influence the entrails' appearances.

Haruspices would charge people to ask a question, to which they would be able to answer 'yes' or 'no' by studying the entrails, weighing up the positive and negative omens and seeing which one prevailed.

As divination was a trusted and elaborate practice, haruspices had to undergo extremely specialised training in order to be taken seriously. A manual called the *Bārûtu*, or 'Art of the Diviner', was circulated from around 600 BCE or earlier, and took up 135 clay tablets.

After the practice, which was directly derived from the Etruscan religion, was adopted by the Romans, it

It's believed that Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas à Becket consulted a haruspex before an expedition against Brittany


Fulvius Alius, a haruspex, is at work before Hercules on this 3rd century CE Roman relief

“A haruspex, someone trained in haruspicy, could predict the future by reading omens found in the entrails of animals like sheep”

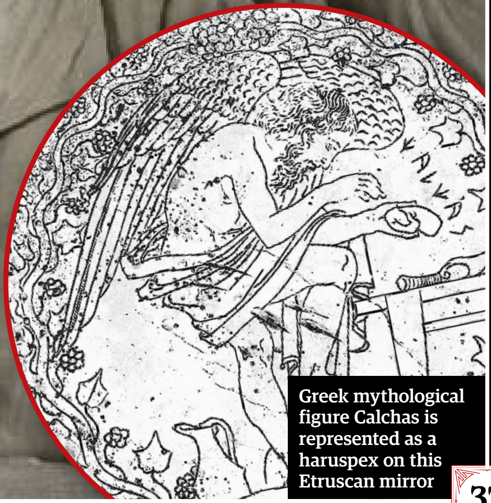
An ancient Roman haruspex inspects the entrails of a sacrificed bull in this piece displayed at Paris' Musée Du Louvre

also became popular with both Christian apostates and pagans, and continued to be regularly used well into the Middle Ages. The Babylonians were also famous for haruspicy, which is mentioned in the *Book of Ezekiel* 21:21: "For the king of the Babylon standeth at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination; he shaketh the arrows to and fro, he inquireth of the seraphim, he looketh at the liver."

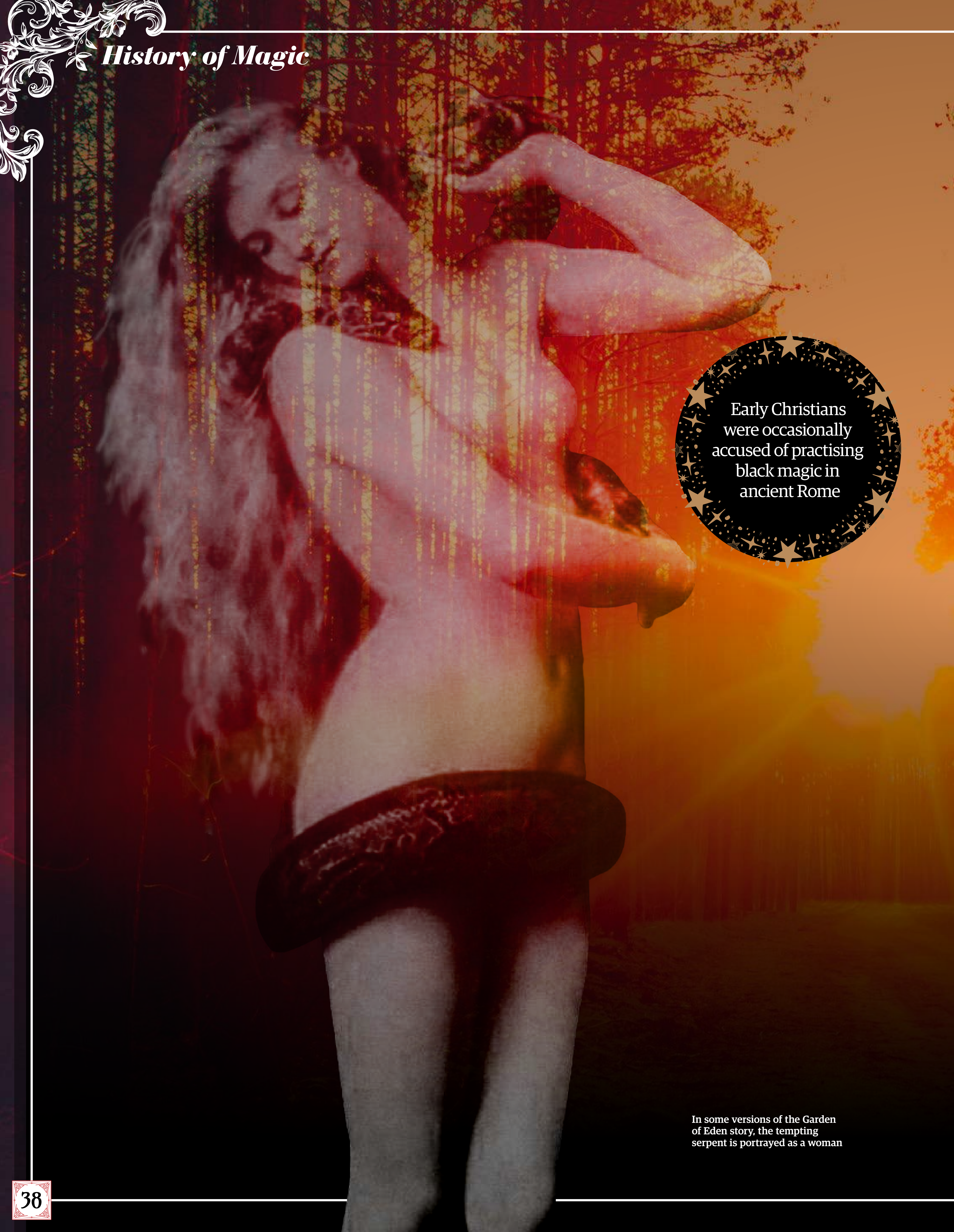
In modern society, slaughtering your own livestock is often frowned upon, so diviners have been known to substitute the sacrificial animal for eggs, instead cracking them open and examining the insides. It is believed that ancient haruspices used to read the entrails of animals because it was a lot more ceremonious and solemn than cracking an egg and presenting the findings.

Sol Invictus (the 'Unconquered Sun') was the official sun god of the later Roman Empire and a patron of Roman soldiers

© Getty Images



Greek mythological figure Calchas is represented as a haruspex on this Etruscan mirror



Early Christians were occasionally accused of practising black magic in ancient Rome

In some versions of the Garden of Eden story, the tempting serpent is portrayed as a woman

The dawn of the witch

In the ancient world magic was a part of everyday life, but as cultures grew and new religions emerged, the idea of witchcraft and those who practised it became twisted and demonic

Written by Frances White

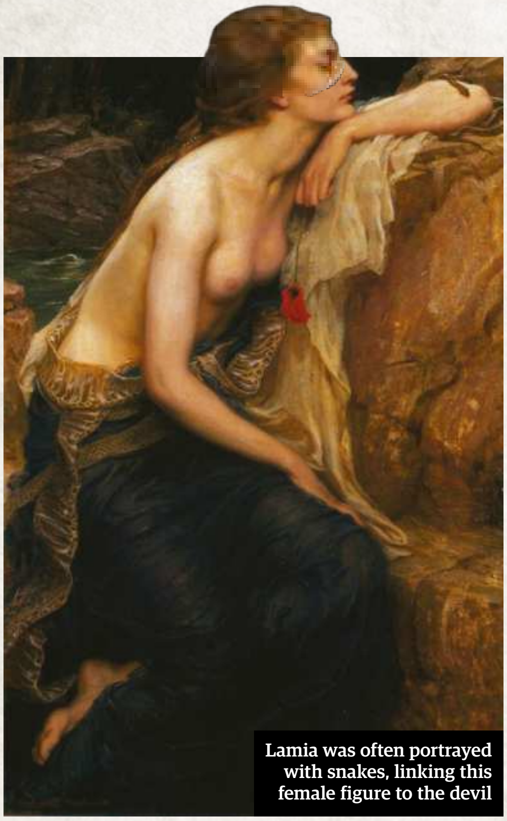
Nearly every culture across the modern world recognises the concept of a witch. Though variations occur, more often than not the witch represents something dark and sinister; something to be feared. Compared to the innocent maiden, clothed in white, the witch is old, ugly, bent double before a cauldron as she brews trouble and strife for unsuspecting victims. The witch is the dark side of femininity, an unhinged, evil presence with great power at her disposal. The witch is a woman who cannot be controlled.

This image has not always been common: it is one, like the witch's potion itself, that has been brewed and tempered over years of mythology, religion and persecution. The earliest versions of witches couldn't be more different from this sinister image – witches were healers and bastions of society. In early Middle Eastern societies, for example, female deities were worshipped, and the holiest of rituals surrounding them were performed by women trained for precisely that purpose. These early examples of witches were known as wise women and were seen as crucial to society. They would stand beside kings, armies would come to them for sacred rituals, and expectant mothers relied on them to deliver babies. But how did this figure, so adored and revered in early society, transform into the spectre of evil and misdeeds that we recognise today?

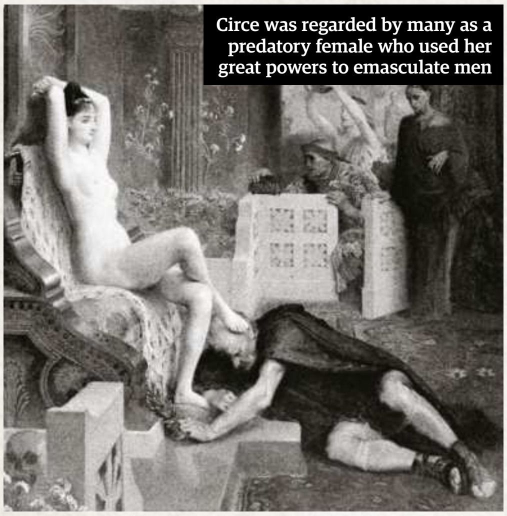
There are many different arguments as to how this transformation took place. One explanation claims that when the Indo-Europeans expanded westward their male-dominated culture, which focused on the power of warriors, war and fierce male gods, overtook the gentler, passive female deities that had previously ruled. Although our actual knowledge of the Indo-Europeans is not extensive, there is evidence that the social perception of magic, and the females who practised it, changed upon the development of male-dominated societies and religions.

> The idea witches had the ability to turn men into animals was elaborated on by writers, fuelling the Witch Hunt craze

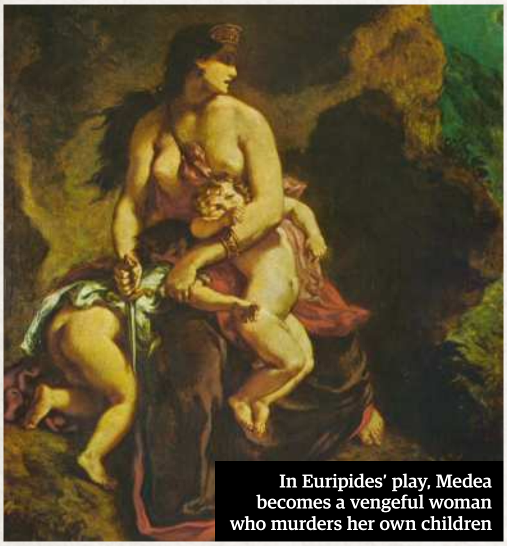
The most concrete way to look at how witches came to be regarded is by examining figures of myth. These mystical women able to conduct magic became a common archetype in many myths of the ancient world. A prime example of this dangerous 'bewitching' woman is Lilith. A figure from Jewish mythology, Lilith was a promiscuous demon of the night



Lamia was often portrayed with snakes, linking this female figure to the devil



Circe was regarded by many as a predatory female who used her great powers to emasculate men



In Euripides' play, Medea becomes a vengeful woman who murders her own children

who kidnaps children. Lilith was also portrayed as leading Adam astray and leaving the Garden of Eden after she refuses to be subservient to him. Lilith was a figure to be feared, a woman with powers who used them to torment. These stories fuelled the male-centric religion, and in the teachings, witchcraft was seen as dangerous and outlawed as a pagan practice. For the Jewish people encountering societies that worshipped female Gods, this distrust was a useful way to establish their own religious dominance.

Greek mythology also features many female figures who practise magic, but their portrayal is not quite as damning. Medea, an ancient Greek heroine, was a sorceress who helped Jason during his quests, providing him with spells, potions and magic. At first Medea ends up happily married to Jason and the two have children together. Medea's role is that of the helper; the provider of magic for the male hero. In this myth, magic is a positive thing; it helps Jason to succeed, and the woman providing it knows her place. It is her duty to help the hero and then marry and have babies with him.

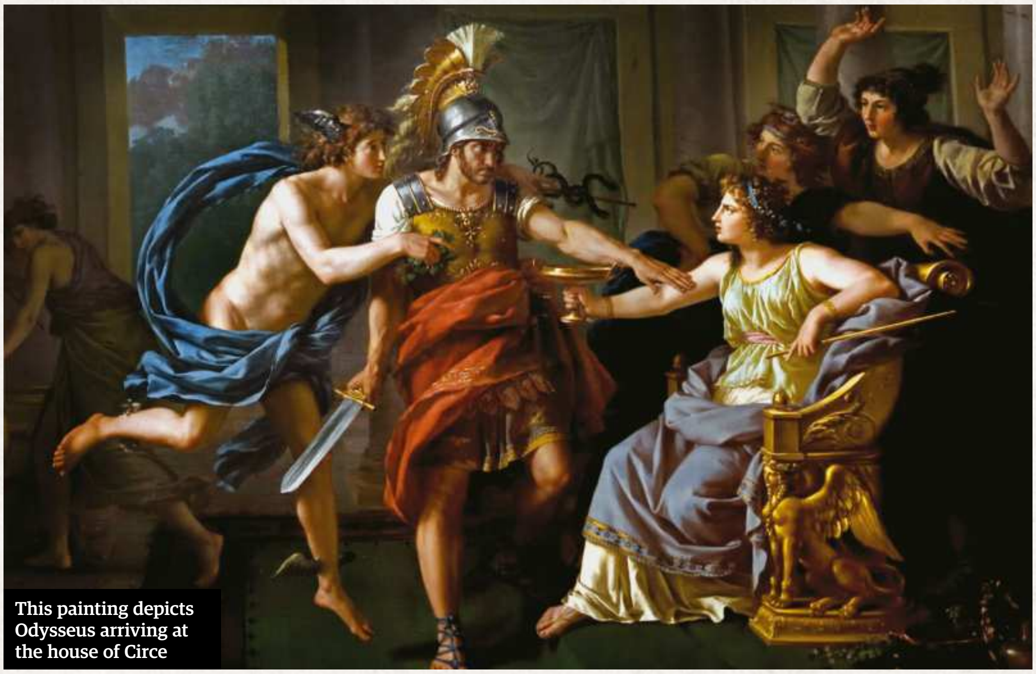
We can see how the Greeks viewed witches differently in the story of Circe. In the *Odyssey*, Circe is portrayed as a dangerous woman who transforms Odysseus' men into pigs. She uses potions, casts magic with a wand and even makes herself invisible. Odysseus uses a magic root given to him by the male god Hermes to defeat her. In the end, the rebellious Circe swears an oath to not use any more magic against the hero, then ends up feeding his entire crew and sleeping with him. The outcome is a happy one: the powerful woman who tried to trick and fool men finally accepts her 'rightful' place as a lover and homemaker.

More damning portrayals of magical women who did not rein in their murderous impulses can also be found. Lamia began as a beautiful queen who turned into a terrifying being that devours the children of others. This unhinged, demonic woman is portrayed in some versions as possessing a serpent's tail below the waist. Lamia became a figure of great fear, one that mothers would use to threaten their children with to encourage good behaviour. It is easy to see how tales of this frightening, demonic woman could have seeped into society and altered the perception of magic and what the women who practised it were capable of.

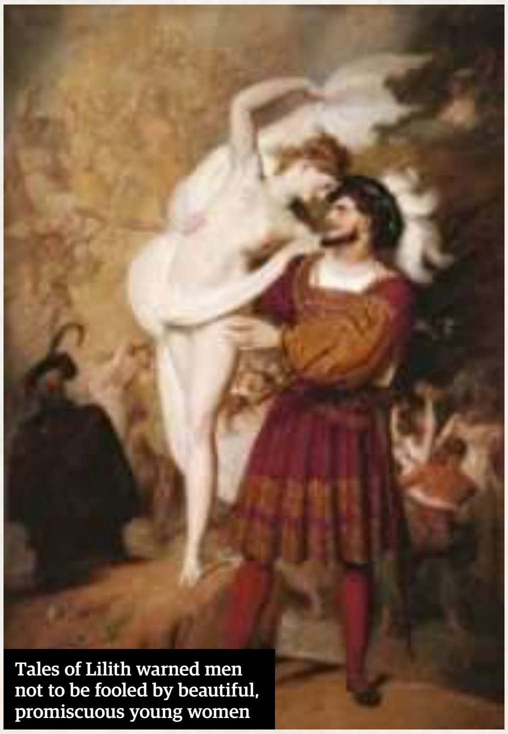
The Greeks themselves were ambivalent about magic. In fact, they had their own form of religious

The Witch of Endor, who appears in the Bible and summons the dead, has caused much debate among theologians

"Mystical women able to conduct magic became common in myths"



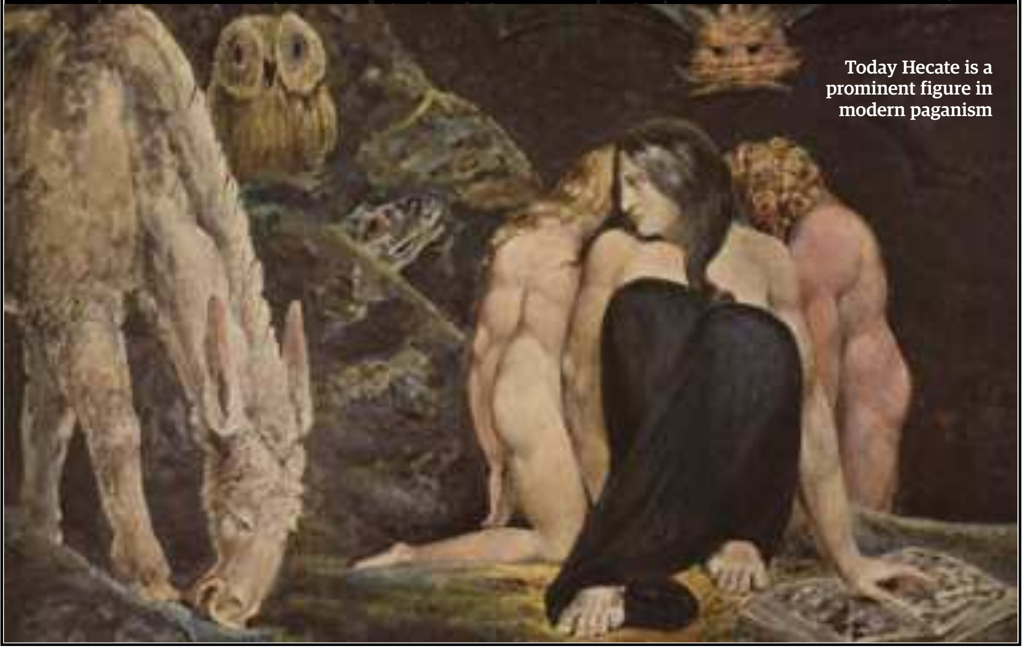
This painting depicts Odysseus arriving at the house of Circe



Tales of Lilith warned men not to be fooled by beautiful, promiscuous young women

Hecate: Goddess of witches

In early Greek mythology Hecate was the goddess of the wilderness and childbirth, but her role developed over time into goddess of sorcery and even queen of ghosts. Hecate is commonly depicted as having three heads to indicate her multifaceted character – moon, earth, underworld and maiden, mother, crone. It was believed that as a goddess of sorcery she could keep out evil spirits, so images of her were placed in doorways and city gates. But this developed the misconception that she could also let evil spirits in if displeased. This led to the belief that she guarded the borders between our world and the spirit world, and Christian perceptions of this powerful witch became altogether more negative. Her association with female dogs and snakes, as well as her ability to transform into a black dog, helped to demonise her further, and fed the notion that witches could transform at will. By the 15th century it was believed that Hecate was revered by witches and her role as goddess of all witches became so ingrained in society that Shakespeare references her in *Macbeth*, as the titular character utters "Witchcraft celebrates pale Hecate's offerings."



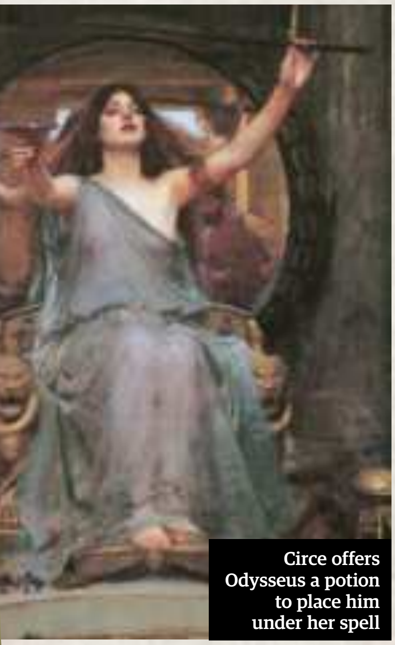
Today Hecate is a prominent figure in modern paganism

magic, surrounding rituals to invoke the power of gods. What they were against, however, were women who did not know their place. There were examples of women receiving the death sentence for distributing bewitching drugs and uttering incantations. The Greeks thoroughly believed in the power of magic, and there were many who were so afraid of it that they campaigned to eradicate magic from society entirely. State-controlled magic, such as rituals for the gods, was seen as acceptable, but magic in the hands of the lower classes, especially poor women, was regarded as dangerous, and those who practised it were seen as being at odds with normal society.

As Roman culture was heavily influenced by Greek myth, these common perceptions of demonic beings and the good, obedient, motherly witch still held great influence. The Romans also openly acknowledged the use of magic. In fact, it became part of the society's state religion, and many believed the use of it was a reason for the empire's success. This religion was controlled by the upper classes and was directly connected to Roman law. When the empire encountered new religions or cults claiming to also possess magical powers, this was seen as sacrilegious and most certainly dangerous to the balance of patriarchal power in Rome. Women may have been unable to defeat men physically, but magic and religion were subtler ways of rebelling, and the Romans, like the Greeks before them, hated nothing more than a powerful woman. Although both men and women were known to practise witchcraft, it was women who bore the brunt of the persecution. Black magic and those who practised it were condemned in Roman law. Anyone who used magic to blight crops or to spread disease was punished severely. It was believed these sorceresses could make poisons, summon the dead, influence

> Lamia was also said to be have been able to remove her eyes, which gave her the gift of prophecy

In some Egyptian -inspired Greek writing, Hecate is said to have the head of a dog, serpent and horse



Circe offers Odysseus a potion to place him under her spell

© Corbis, Alamy

Magic in the ancient world

Magic has been present since the earliest human cultures

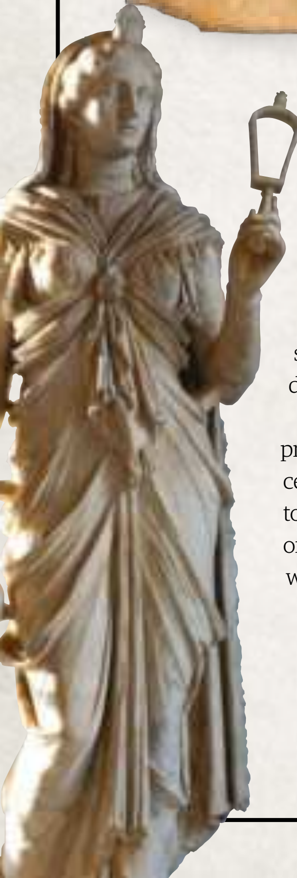
It was believed that the Nile flooded every year due to the tears Isis wept for her brother and husband Osiris

Israel

Although magic was officially condemned in the ancient Jewish world, there are many examples of what we would consider 'magic' today used in ancient Hebrew cultures. Magical recipes and spells have been found, and there were instances of exorcisms of demons, a wide array of amulets, incantation bowls and also medical magic used. Although some Jewish leadership condemned this, most didn't condemn it at all, and others even adopted it themselves.

Egypt

From conception to death, belief in magic underpinned all aspects of life in ancient Egypt. Amulets, rituals and magic images were used in everyday life, and magician priests invoked the power of the god of magic, Heka, to greater ends. Magic and medicine went hand in hand, with a medical practitioner working alongside a magical one, and gods were summoned to deal with diseases deemed 'supernatural'.



the weather and even shape-shift. The practice of burning witches occurred in Rome far before it became associated with Christians, and for the Roman rulers this presented a unique opportunity to deal with other undesirables, such as those who followed different religions.

Isis was an incredibly prominent figure who sat at the centre of a cult that threatened to extinguish the early sparks of Christianity. This goddess was worshipped not only in Egypt but also throughout the Roman Empire. As well as being presented as a perfect mother and wife, Isis was a goddess of magic, but unlike the negative examples often displayed in other myths, Isis seemed to represent the idealised form of a magical woman. She was friend to the downtrodden but also to the elite of society, and she was a devoted mother who used her powers for good. Although worship of her was initially frowned upon in the Roman Empire, when Emperor Caligula showed his support, the cult surrounding Isis began to flourish. The religion actually developed alongside Christianity in its most formative years, and there is some argument that this image of Isis as a heavenly mother with a prophesied son of kings influenced early Christianity.

Although the two religions grew side by side, they were simply incompatible, and sooner or later one would have to erase the other. In Christian texts there are no blurred lines regarding witchcraft, with the Bible stating that anyone who "casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead… is detestable to the Lord". To further drive the point home it also warns, "Do not allow a sorceress to live." For Christianity, witchcraft was seen as running counter to religion and even associated with the devil. Isis and her magic were regarded as evil pagan beliefs. As Christianity spread, the cult of Isis and worship of any other pagan gods was outlawed, and in the 6th century Isis' temple on the island of Philae, which had served as a pilgrimage site for thousands of years, was closed by the Christian Emperor Justinian.

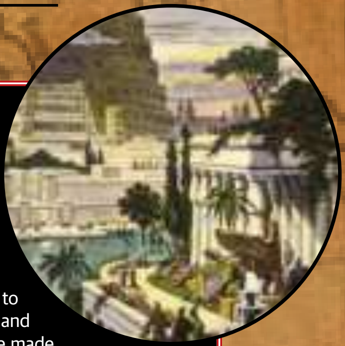
> In the 350s CE Roman Emperor Constantius II banned the use of magic, although his law was widely ignored

Sumer

Sumerians had an elaborate demonology underpinning their society. They believed the world was full of hostile spirits, and everyone had their own spirits to protect them from the demons. Magic, which varied from amulets, spells and even exorcisms, was believed to be the only way to fight these supernatural enemies.

Assyria

Like the Sumerians, Assyrians believed that all diseases were the result of possession by demons, and as well as herbal prescriptions, incantations were also prescribed to patients to rid themselves of common maladies such as toothache. They also had a strong belief in vampires, and the 'seven evil spirits of Assyria' were believed to be vampires.



Babylon

Magic was an integral part of daily life in Babylon. Spirits of the dead were called upon for counsel, or even to haunt the living. Stones and herbs were believed to have magical properties, and statues and amulets were made out of them for particular uses.

Chaldea

Chaldea was so renowned for its powerful magical teachings that it was considered to be one of the ancient centres for the study and use of magic. Countless spells were used, and Chaldean priests believed in many varieties of demons, ghosts and spirits. They would use divination to predict the future, draw magic circles and exorcise the evil entities that were responsible for disease.

Christianity also pointed the finger at adulterous, or rather, unmarried according to the strict Christian standard, women as the ultimate embodiment of evil, claiming that 'unconstrained women, perverted by Satan, profess to ride upon the backs of beasts with a countless horde of women'. These pagan women were accused of 'infidelity' and being drawn into a 'pit of faithlessness'. As powerful female sorceresses such as Isis were condemned, it is easy to see how the perception of the dangerous female witch was encouraged, not eradicated, by the spread of Christianity.

> The cult of Isis was so powerful that Cleopatra claimed to be the goddess reincarnated

Christianity itself did not spring out of the gate fully formed; it developed over years of labour and toil, and it is almost impossible to believe that it could not have been influenced by the religions around it. Most religions are syncretic at some point. So many of these religions relied on witchcraft or belief in magic, so for Christianity, witchcraft was classed as a superstition, something that did not actually exist. Early Christianity actually established that belief in witchcraft alone was proof a person had been deceived by the devil and so could be executed. This set Christianity in opposition to many of the flourishing religions at the time and allowed for its later domination. Anyone who even believed witchcraft was possible (an essential part of many religions) was demonised, and heretic after heretic was executed. Just like the Greeks, Hebrews and Romans before them, the Christians used magic and witchcraft as a scapegoat and a way of demonising the different.

For almost as long as magic has existed, laws against it have prevailed. Often these views against witchcraft and those who practised magic were a response to religions spreading and encountering mysterious belief systems that ran in opposition to their own, such as in the case of the Jews and the spread of Christianity. Even in the societies that practised magic, such as ancient Greece and Rome, there were strict laws defining what was 'acceptable'. These depictions of magic users in myth were exploited to fuel an idealised image of how society – especially women – should behave, and any who rebelled were associated with the demonic figures from myth.

For centuries, images of these infamous women from myth would be used to fuel common perceptions of female witches. It's only recently that we've seen this ancient propaganda begin to be re-evaluated in the light of more nuanced views.

Palmistry

You can tell a lot from a person's face, and even more from their hands, if you just so happen to be a skilled chirologist...

Written by Poppy-Jay Palmer

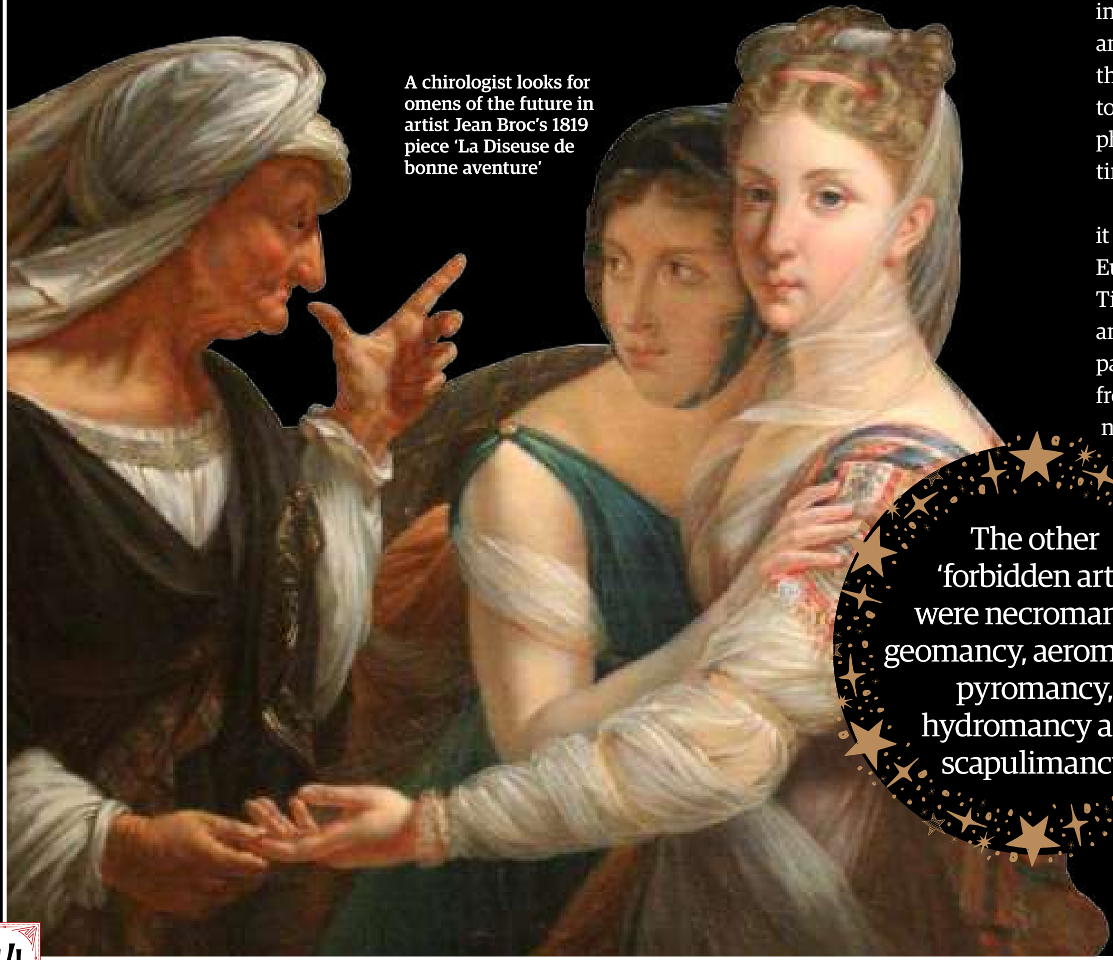
Also known as chiromancy, palmistry is the ancient palm-reading divination practice that is still being used today. Those who practice palmistry are usually called palmists, hand readers, hand analysts or chirologists. Unlike other divinatory arts, interpretations of the palm tend to differ across different schools of palmistry. Add that to the fact that there has always been a big lack of evidence as to whether palmistry predictions are accurate, and you can see why this led to the art being viewed as a pseudoscience by academics.

Through examining palms, chirologists are supposedly able to evaluate a person's character or future life. They look at the lines on the palm and determine what they mean based on their size, quality, and what their intersections look like. Sometimes the divination extends to looking at fingers, hand flexibility, skin patterns, also known as dermatoglyphics, and more. Even a person's hand shape can determined their future, and these are classified by one of four groups: earth (usually broad, with coarse skin), air (square with long fingers), water (long, oval-shaped palm with long fingers), and fire (square, with flushed skin and short fingers).

The main section of a reading, however, is based around the lines found on almost all hands: the heart line, found towards the top of the palm and linked to love and attraction; the head line, starting at the edge of the palm under the index finger and flowing to the other edge, linked to intellectualism, learning and communication style, and knowledge, and the life line, which starts at the end of the palm above the thumb and flows to just above the wrist, and is linked to vitality, physical health and wellbeing and, in ancient times, a person's lifespan.

Though palmistry is practiced all over the world, it has always been most commonly used on the Eurasian landmass, particularly in India, Nepal, Tibet, Persia, China, Sumer, Babylon, Mesopotamia and historic Palestine. Many people believe palmistry began in ancient India and spread from there, but the exact origins of the art are now unknown. However, through moving across countries and cultures, it also developed a lot, especially in ancient Greece.

By medieval times, palmistry was practiced by witch-hunters, who saw uneven pigmentation and black spots on the palm as a sign of making a deal with the devil. It began to be suppressed by the Catholic Church, which saw it as a pagan superstition. By the Renaissance, it made a comeback in the magical world, but was still classified as a 'forbidden art'.



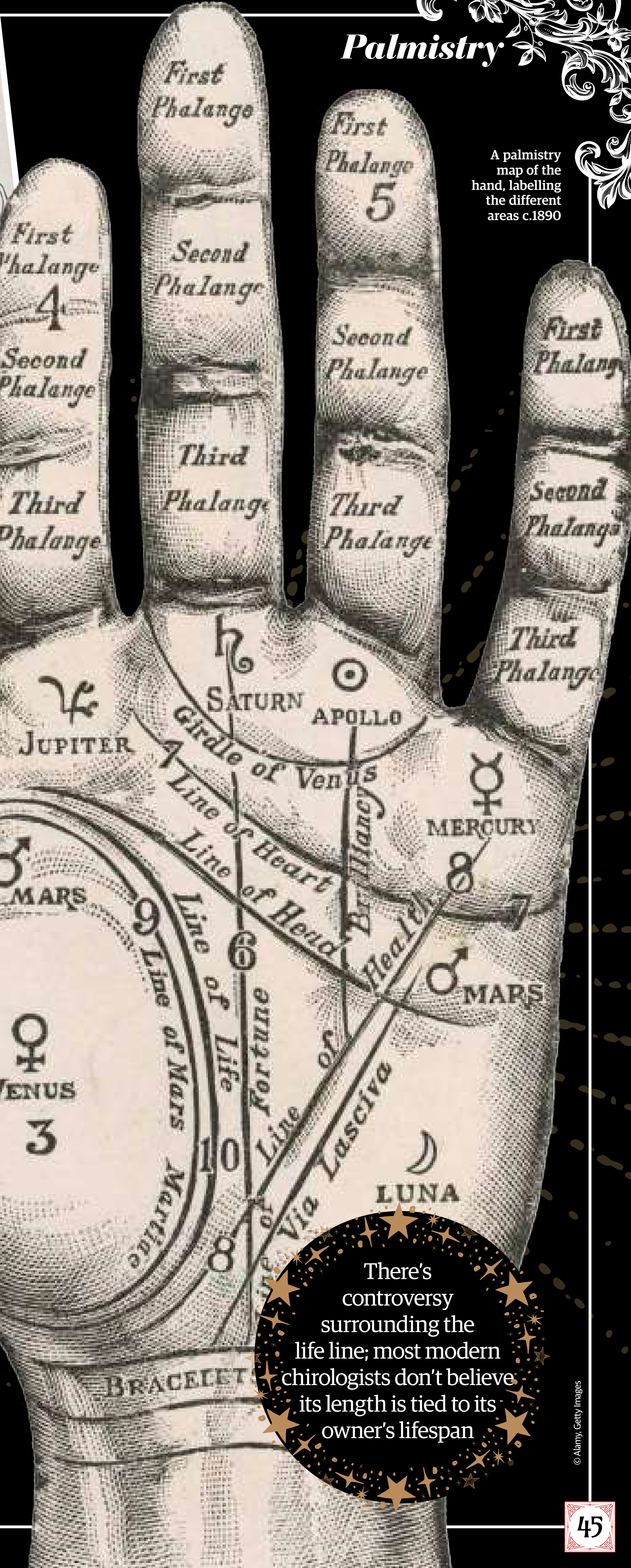
A chirologist looks for omens of the future in artist Jean Broc's 1819 piece 'La Diseuse de bonne aventure'

The other 'forbidden arts' were necromancy, geomancy, aeromancy, pyromancy, hydromancy and scapulimancy

OSSO DESTINO ESCRIPTO
NAS NOSSAS MÃOS.
CHIROMANCIA

Madame Brouillard, a famous Portuguese palmist, made her fortune by reading hands

> “Palmists determine what the lines mean based on their size, quality, and what their intersections look like”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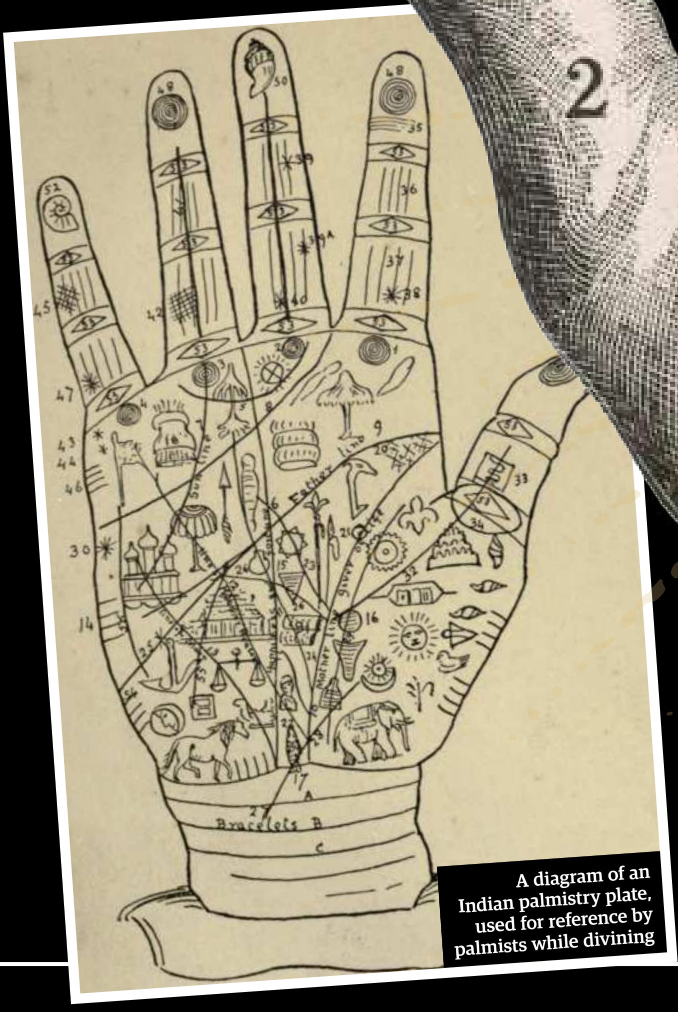
JUPITER
SATURN
APOLLO
MERCURY
Girdle of Venus
7
Line of Heart
Line of Head
Line of Brilliancy
Line of Health
8
7
MARS
MARS
9
Line of Mars
Line of Life
6
Line of Fortune
Line of
VENUS
3
10
Line of
Via Lasciva
Martiae
8
LUNA
BRACELET

A palmistry map of the hand, labelling the different areas c.1890

There's controversy surrounding the life line; most modern chirologists don't believe its length is tied to its owner's lifespan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A
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A diagram of an Indian palmistry plate, used for reference by palmists while divining

© Alamy, Getty Images

Renaissance magic

The passion for knowledge and how to use it led thinkers deep into a mysterious world where the boundaries between nature, supernature and religion were far from clear

Written by Derek Wilson

In the 15th and 16th centuries the Western and Near-eastern worlds were home to three major religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism. All had their intellectual elites with their own convictions about the cosmos and man's place in it. There also existed a multi-faceted paganism, which saw the world as populated with an array of spirit beings, beneficent and malign, who constantly intervened in the lives of humans. All thinking participants in this rainbow-hued speculation had one thing in common: they all agreed that life had meaning. The scholars of these great religions might have continued to work within their own traditions were it not for a series of events in the century 1440-1540 that brought about the most far-reaching intellectual revolution in our history – a revolution that later ages came to call the 'Renaissance'.

> In 1489 Marsilio Ficino was accused of magic before Pope Innocent VIII

There were three powerful factors that brought about this transformation. The first (c.1440) was the invention of a printing press that used moveable type. Before this, books had been expensive, hand-written products that could only be read in libraries or in the homes of wealthy collectors. Now that printing was a fast-growing industry, scholars and students could buy their own copies of mass-produced works and exchange their own ideas with each other much more easily.

The second event added significantly to the number of books available. In 1453 the great city of Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire, was captured by Muslim Turks. Among the citizens who fled from this invasion were leading intellectuals who took with them several of their precious ancient texts. The boundaries of academic debate now widened to embrace both newly available religious/philosophical thinking and re-interpretation of traditional beliefs.

The third event was an even more radical understanding of Christian truth. Around 1520, thinkers and preachers in various parts of Europe began to challenge various aspects of orthodox Church teaching. This came to be known as the Reformation. The combination of these influences – and not forgetting the pagan superstition, which was felt by people at all levels of society – produced a large array of ideas and beliefs that led to vigorous debate, persecution and, eventually, to war.

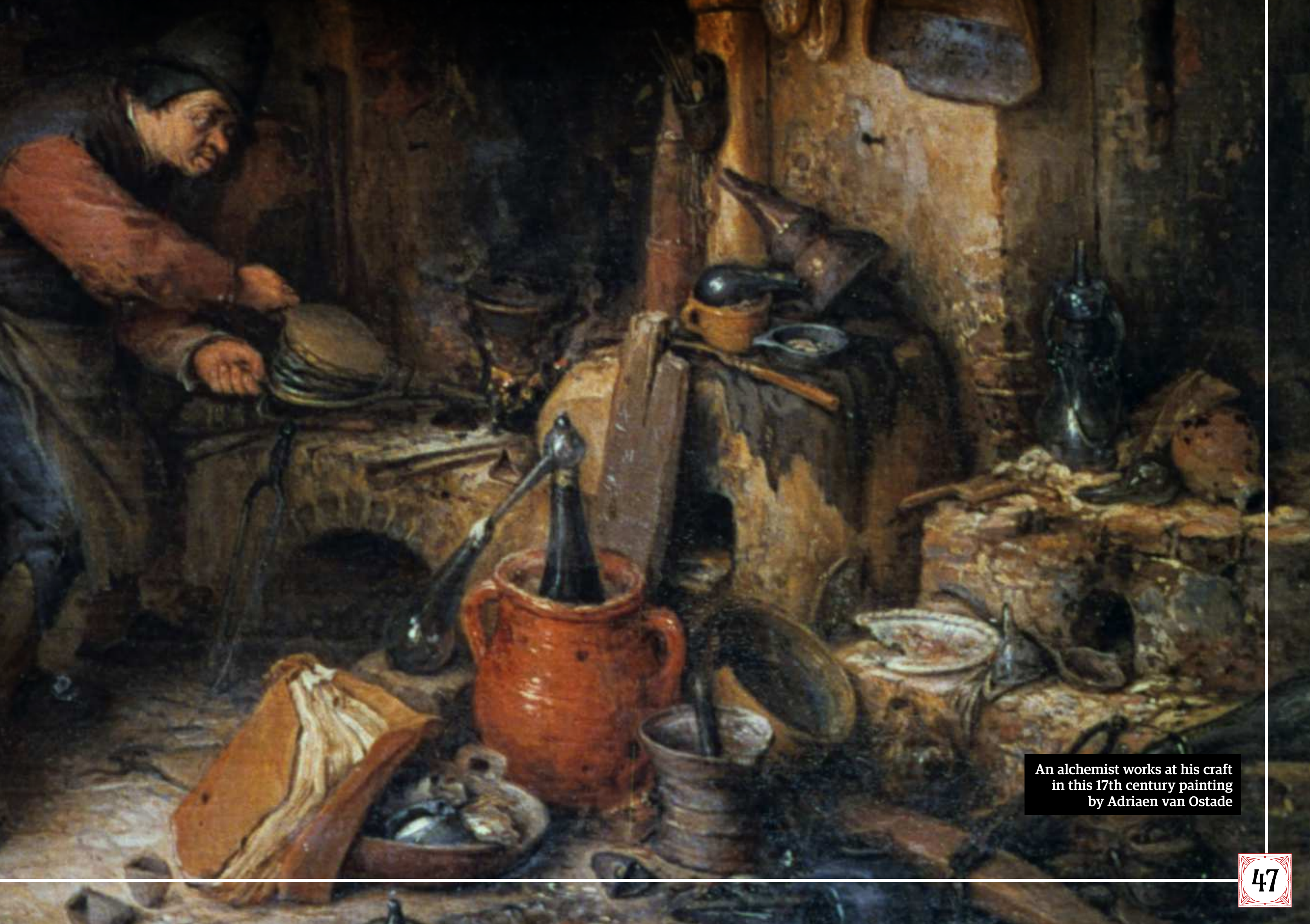
The first 'factory' creating this new thinking was North Italy. Scholars working in universities such as Florence and Bologna or in the households of wealthy patrons – merchant princes, rulers of city states or senior ecclesiastics – were much involved in studying the works of classical antiquity – the great philosophers, poets and historians of Greece and Rome who were the founders of their own culture. When the refugees from Constantinople arrived they brought, as well as their own religious, poetic and historical writings, writings of classical authors, which had been long lost in the West but preserved in the East, some of them translated into Arabic. Scholarly Jews also found themselves forced to flee their homes in these years, some from the conquering Muslims in the East and some from Spain, where a purge by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella led to the expulsion or forced conversion of Jews in 1492. As a result, students of the Hebrew Wisdom literature, and especially of that esoteric branch known as Kabbalah, were drawn to the Italian centres of intellectual activity and found themselves debating with their Christian and Muslim counterparts.

To advanced Renaissance thinkers it now seemed obvious that the three great religions must all owe their origins to a more fundamental source of truth and wisdom. This 'prisca theologia' was ardently sought by Renaissance scholars. It was - or so they thought - the gateway to what the ancient Greeks called 'gnosis' (knowledge) - and also to what they labelled 'exousia' (authority/power). The two were inseparably linked, for the person who understood the nature and workings of the temporal and spiritual realms could use that knowledge in a variety of ways. Such men were magi or magicians.

Everyone in medieval society believed in magic, the ability to manipulate the forces latent in nature. The ranks of those initiated into the occult (supernatural or mystical knowledge) included the local wise woman, the herbalist, the apothecary, the alchemist, the astrologer and the necromancer. Church leaders were ardent in warning against malign magic but none doubted the reality of harnessing the forces of nature and supernature. Many clergy, for example, cast horoscopes. There was no clear distinction between theological and philosophical understanding of the workings of the universe. If God had endowed certain herbs with medicinal properties to relieve human suffering, could he not also have arranged the motions of heavenly bodies to assist in the wellbeing of mankind? The distinction between village folklore and philosophical speculation might appear to be absolute but in reality any difference boils down to degrees of intellectual sophistication.

Let us, for the moment, restrict our debate to the profound Renaissance thinkers who were striving to frame an orderly understanding of the workings of the universe. The lead in these deliberations was taken by a group in Florence founded by Marsilio Ficino. It was known as the Platonic Academy because it took its inspiration from the followers of the 6th-century BCE Athenian philosopher, Plato. The Academicians were, however, Neoplatonists because they belonged to a long tradition of philosophers who sought to relate the teaching of the Greek master to later intellectual/spiritual developments, particularly the advent of Christianity. For Ficino and his friends an unbroken chain of gnosis stretched right back, via Plato, to the prisca theologia.

Neoplatonism rejected a clear-cut distinction between matter and spirit. Everything in the universe was suffused by spiritual entities, all of which interacted to control terrestrial life, the movements of the spheres and the activities of the Creator and his angelic cohorts in heaven.



An alchemist works at his craft in this 17th century painting by Adriaen van Ostade

The branch of philosophy to which Neoplatonism belongs is called 'metaphysics', the study of what lies above and beyond the physical universe that we apprehend with our five senses. To understand the workings of the cosmos was to be in a position to manipulate it - in other words, to practise magic. Metaphysicians identified three categories of magic. Natural magic harnessed the forces present on earth. This embraced herbalism, using the properties of plants to create medicines but also nostrums capable of affecting personality. But it also extended to 'reading' the human body and the use of fire, air and water in changing the composition of natural substances. From the latter the science of chemistry would grow but it also embraced the concept of 'transmuting' basic elements, such as changing lead into gold. The second category was celestial magic, which concerned studying the movements of heavenly bodies and their influence on human behaviour and destiny. The third branch was ceremonial magic, which involved 'conjuring' spiritual beings to do one's bidding. A necromancer might consort with the dead to discover buried treasure or perform spells to harm his enemies.

It can be seen how all of these have their appeal to human beings 'trapped' in a universe they do not understand, and captive, also, to their own inner compulsions - ambition, greed, lust or even, simply, the desire to be happy and healthy.

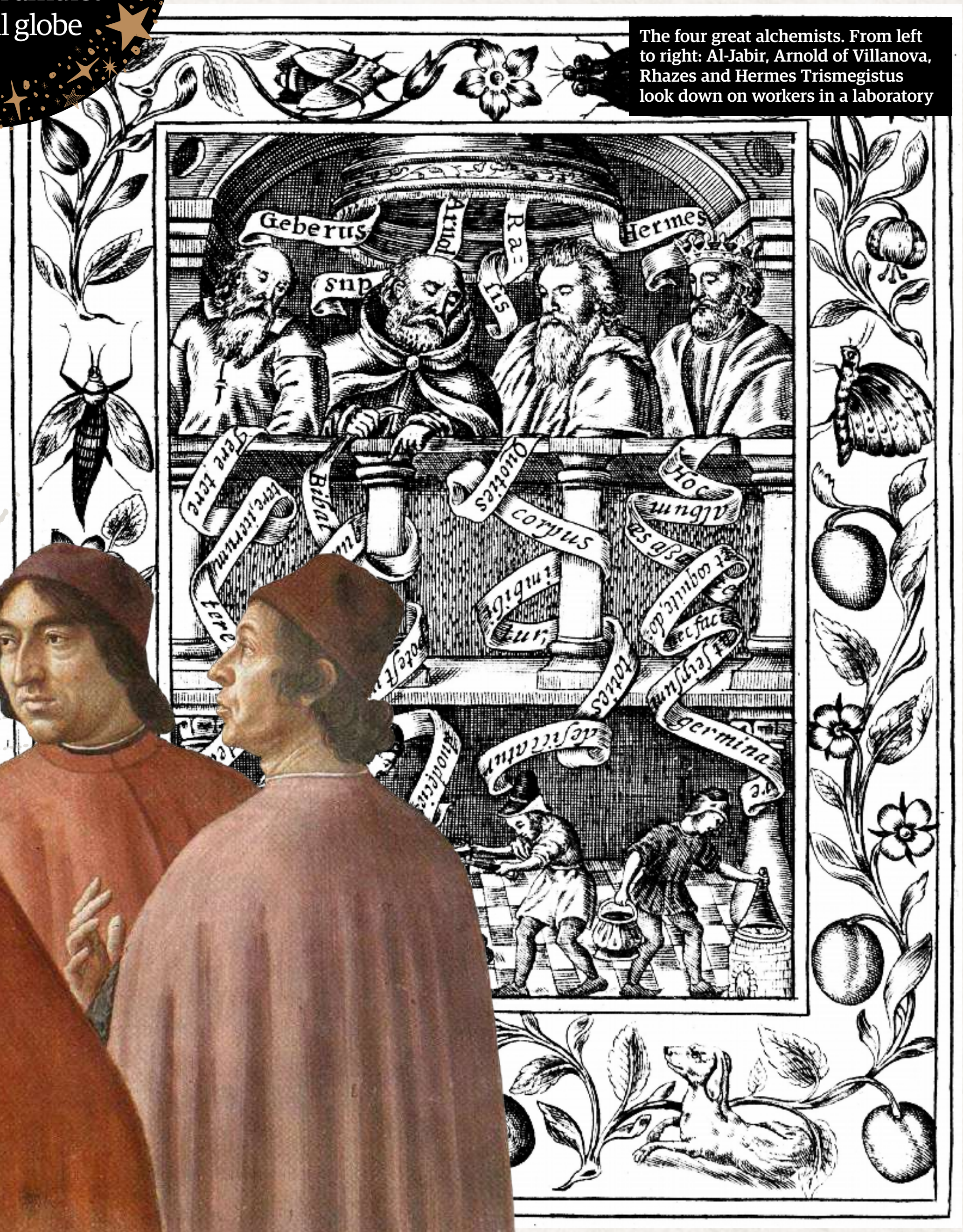
The British Museum holds several artefacts once owned by John Dee, including an amulet and crystal globe

Preachers and moralists were not slow to point out the dangers of dabbling in matters beyond what God allowed. Early in the Renaissance a legend began circulating about a certain Johann Georg Faust, whose intellectual pride and insatiable curiosity drove him into the arms of the devil. At the end of the 16th century, Christopher Marlowe turned this story into a play - *Doctor Faustus*. He presented his central character as one who had mastered all branches of human knowledge and found them wanting until he eventually discovered magic:

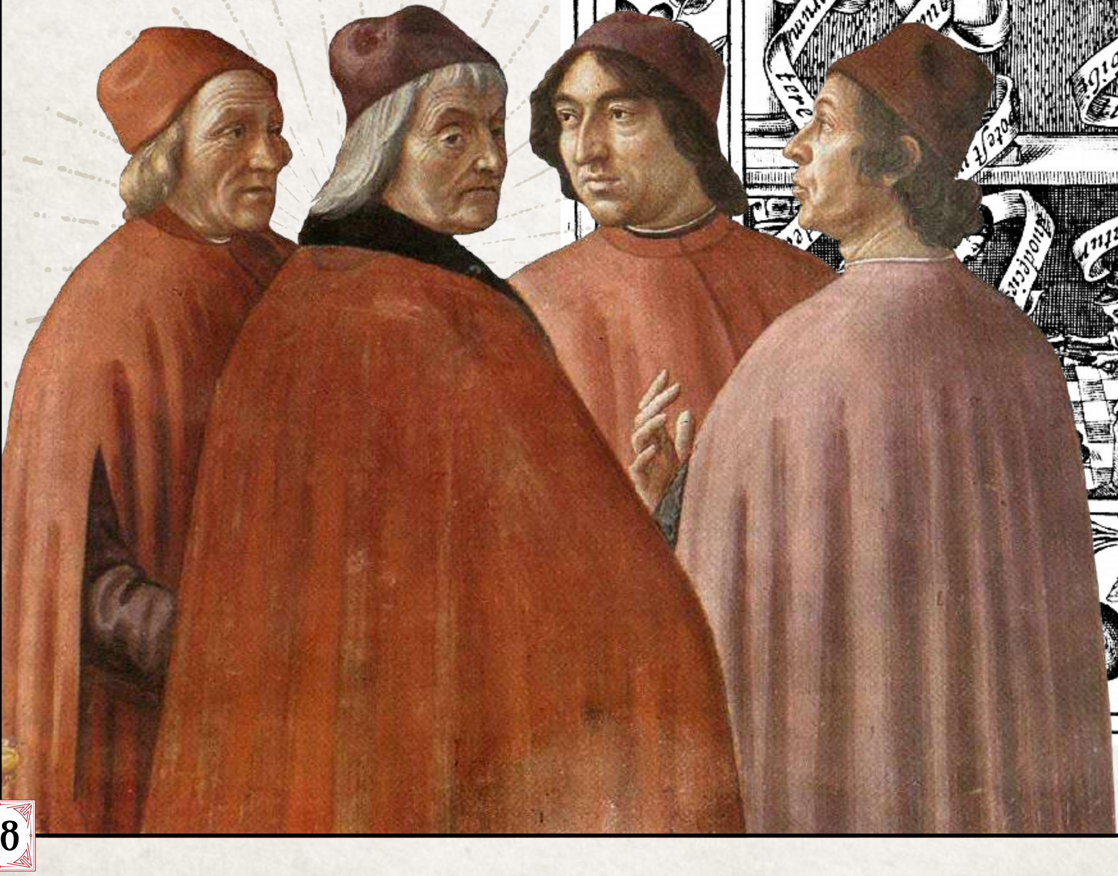
"These Metaphysics of magicians,
And Necromantic books are heavenly;
Lines, circles, scenes, letters and characters,
Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires,
O, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence
Is promised to the studious artisan?
All things that move between the quiet poles,
Shall be at my command..."

Faustus makes a pact with Mephistopheles, a spirit sent by Satan to do a deal - unlimited power in exchange for Faustus's soul. The philosopher has a whale of a time - until the day comes when the debt has to be paid.

This, however, is far from the rarified atmosphere of the Renaissance scholars studying ancient authors to discover wisdom for its own sake. Ficino took what was considered to be a major step forward when he translated into Latin a



The four great alchemists. From left to right: Al-Jabir, Arnold of Villanova, Rhazes and Hermes Trismegistus look down on workers in a laboratory

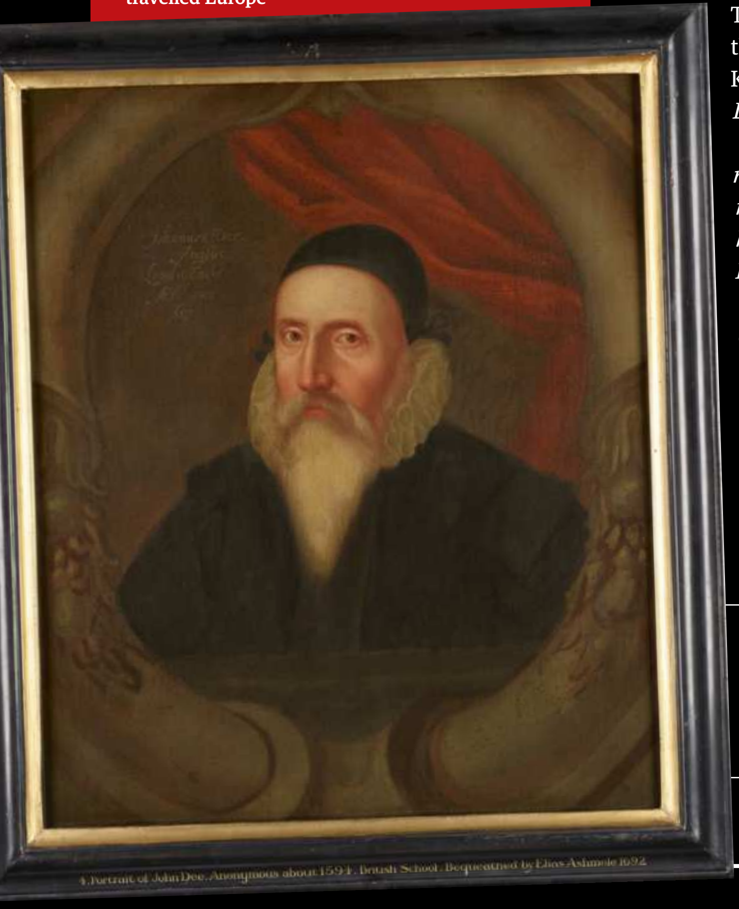


Marsilio Ficino (first on left) from a fresco painted by Domenico Ghirlandaio

England's most famous magus

The extraordinary life of John Dee (1527-1608/9) provides us with a vivid example of how science, philosophy and magic interacted in many Renaissance thinkers. He was one of the most brilliant students to emerge from Cambridge University. Though his studies embraced many subjects, his main interest was mathematics. For him the 'magic' of numbers provided an insight into the mind of God. He applied his skills to cartography and the provision of navigational aids for mariners. From here it was but a short step to promoting England's overseas expansion during the reign of Elizabeth I. But he also studied hermetic philosophy, astrology and alchemy. He enjoyed the patronage of the queen, for whom he cast horoscopes. Increasingly his mind turned towards the conjuration of spirits in which he was assisted by the charlatan, Edward Kelly, who cashed in on Dee's fame for his own ends. Together the two men travelled to several European courts in the 1580s seeking new patrons with their promises of providing the guidance of the spirits and the secret of turning base metals into gold. By the time Dee returned to England, having broken his relationship with Kelly, he discovered that public opinion had turned against his dabbling with 'Satanic' magic and that his laboratory had been trashed by angry neighbours. He never regained his earlier fame and eventually died in comparative poverty.

Many of Dee's prized books and instruments were stolen while he travelled Europe


Portrait of John Dee. Anonymous about 1594. British School. Bequeathed by Elias Ashmole 1692

Corpus Hermeticum first Latin edition by Marsilio Ficino, 1471 CE

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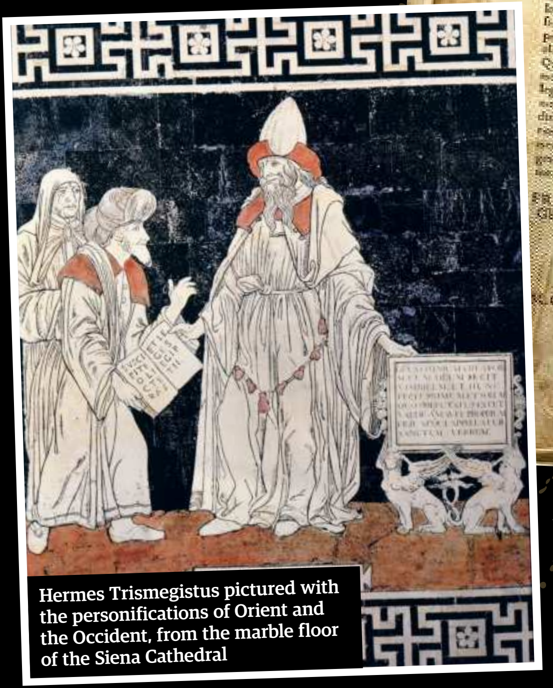


Hermes Trismegistus pictured with the personifications of Orient and the Occident, from the marble floor of the Siena Cathedral

body of writings brought from Constantinople, which he entitled the *Corpus Hermeticum*. This long-lost text purported to be a classical Greek collection of Greco-Egyptian wisdom dating back even further – perhaps 9,000 years – and taught by Hermes Trismegistus – 'Thrice Great Hermes'. This figure was a god, worshipped by Egyptians as Thoth and by Greeks as Hermes. His teaching was supposedly relayed in various strands. He featured in Zoroastrian worship. He appeared in the Quran as a prophet. Jewish writings mentioned him as a contemporary of Moses. It is easy to see why his Renaissance rediscoverers should have associated him with the prisca theologia. The hermetic writings were mystical and complex. They could scarcely be otherwise, since they claimed to explain everything. Keith Thomas, in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* offered this summary:

> *"It taught that by mystical regeneration it was possible for man to regain dominion over nature which he had lost at the Fall [in the Garden of Eden]. Its astrological and alchemical lore helped to create an intellectual environment sympathetic to every kind of mystical and magical activity."*

It was all incredibly mysterious and impressive and compelling. The only problem was that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was a fraud. That is to say that, while elements of it went back to classical times, the compendium was written no earlier than 300 CE. This was demonstrated in 1614 by Genevan scholar Isaac Casaubon, regarded by many contemporaries as the most brilliant Greek scholar of the age.

Away from the rarified atmosphere of philosophical debate, ordinary mortals needed help in coping with the problems of everyday existence. For most people life was, by modern European standards, short and uncomfortable. Average life expectancy was about 35. Most people dwelt in what we would think of as slum conditions. Disease was rife. For example, Renaissance Europe had not yet fully recovered from the Black Death, which had run amok in the mid-14th century and wiped out between a third and a half of the population. Poverty was rife and many families lived a precarious existence on the subsistence level. They needed all the help they could get for their own wellbeing and that of their animals and their crops. No less than the magi, untutored folk believed that the material world was suffused with the spiritual and when they were in need they turned to the 'experts' in their midst who could invoke the aid of higher powers. There were two sources of supernatural power. One was accessed via the Church. The other was available from the practitioners of folk religion.

The most regular 'magic' practised by parish priests was the mass, a service during which the officiant took bread and wine, consecrated them and, by so doing, 'transubstantiated' them into the actual body and blood of Christ. This 'priestly miracle' was the focus of religious life, and masses were performed constantly. For many people the mass elements themselves came to be regarded as possessing holy power. Some worshippers were known to take the consecrated bread away from church, instead of eating it, to use as a charm. The

"The mass elements themselves came to be regarded as possessing holy power"

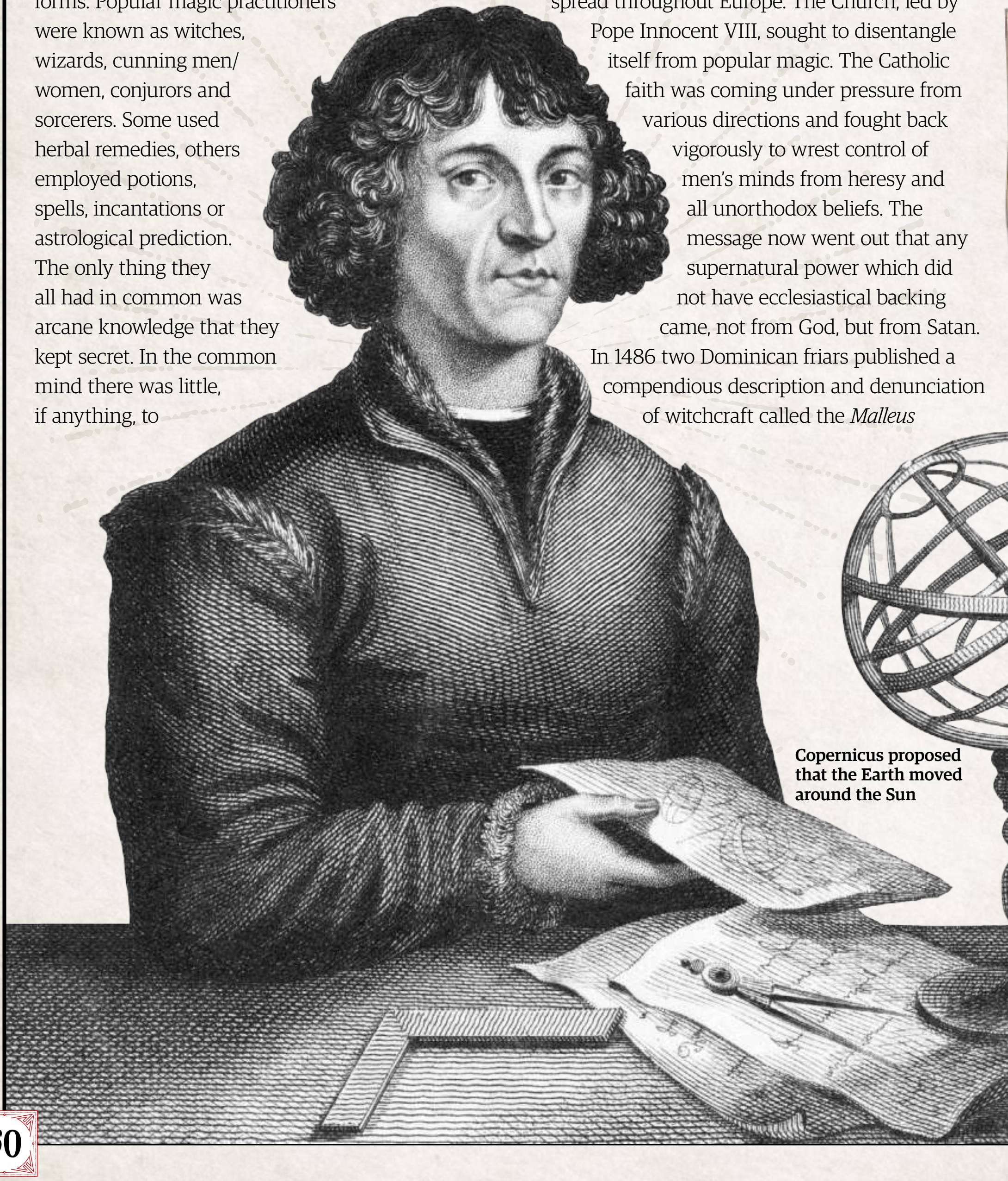
Church disapproved of this but, at the same time, they encouraged this materialistic approach by sponsoring the veneration of holy 'relics'. Items supposedly associated with Christ or the saints were displayed in shrines so that pilgrims could look at, touch or kiss the cases of such relics as 'a finger of St Peter', or 'a fragment of wood from the true Cross'. One of the first books published by the pioneer English printer, William Caxton, was a translation of *The Golden Legend* (1483), an earlier collection of stories describing miracles wrought by saints or their relics. It recorded how a whole city was miraculously preserved by the cloth spread over the tomb of the local martyr, St Agatha. A year after her death the mountain that looms over Catania erupted and spewed a river of fire and molten rock down towards the city. Then crowds of pagans fled from the mountain to the saint's tomb, snatched up the pall that covered it and hung it up in the path of the fire and… the stream of lava halted and did not advance a foot further.

Folk religion took on a confusing variety of forms. Popular magic practitioners were known as witches, wizards, cunning men/women, conjurors and sorcerers. Some used herbal remedies, others employed potions, spells, incantations or astrological prediction. The only thing they all had in common was arcane knowledge that they kept secret. In the common mind there was little, if anything, to distinguish between Church magic and traditional folk remedies. If your child was sick, or your crops spoiled; if you were lovesick or angry with your neighbour; if you wanted to know how a business venture would turn out or were desperately in need of a son to inherit your property, there were a variety of specialists at your disposal. The help you received might contain both religious and naturalistic elements - such as visiting a specific shrine and there repeating mystic incantations. In the 1550s, a Somerset cunning woman, Joan Tyrry, prescribed herbs for treating a bewitched person but insisted that they should be gathered while reciting five Paternosters, five Ave Marias and a Creed.

Legend has it that Copernicus was presented with the final printed pages of his book on the very day that he died

But things were changing drastically as Renaissance and, then, Reformation thinking spread throughout Europe. The Church, led by Pope Innocent VIII, sought to disentangle itself from popular magic. The Catholic faith was coming under pressure from various directions and fought back vigorously to wrest control of men's minds from heresy and all unorthodox beliefs. The message now went out that any supernatural power which did not have ecclesiastical backing came, not from God, but from Satan. In 1486 two Dominican friars published a compendious description and denunciation of witchcraft called the *Malleus Maleficarum*. This notorious book asserted that all practitioners of folk religion had sold their souls and laid down rules for interrogation, conviction and punishment of suspects. In fact, it did not become the weapon in the persecutors' armoury for another century. Its importance lies in what it reveals about the intellectual climate of the time.

A rising tide of scepticism in Europe was threatening to seep into the foundations of the medieval Church and weaken it. People questioned the power of the priesthood and the moral standards of its representatives. Renaissance thinkers like Ficino did not cease to be devout Catholics, but their speculations about the history of Christianity and its connection with Islamic and Jewish thought challenged official teaching. At the grassroots the spread of literacy and the reading



Copernicus proposed that the Earth moved around the Sun

SCENO
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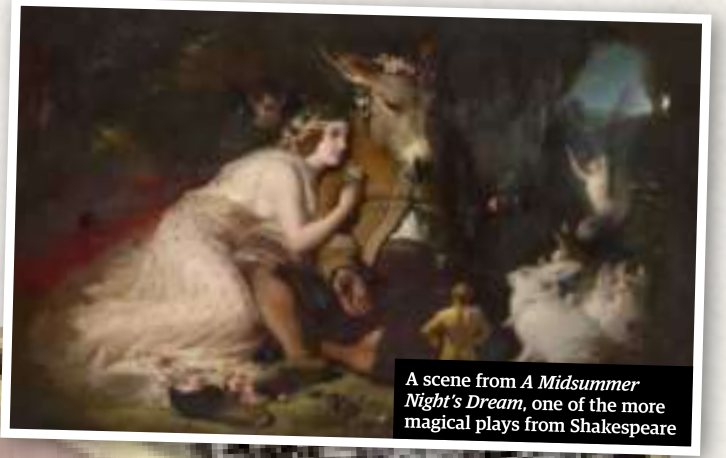
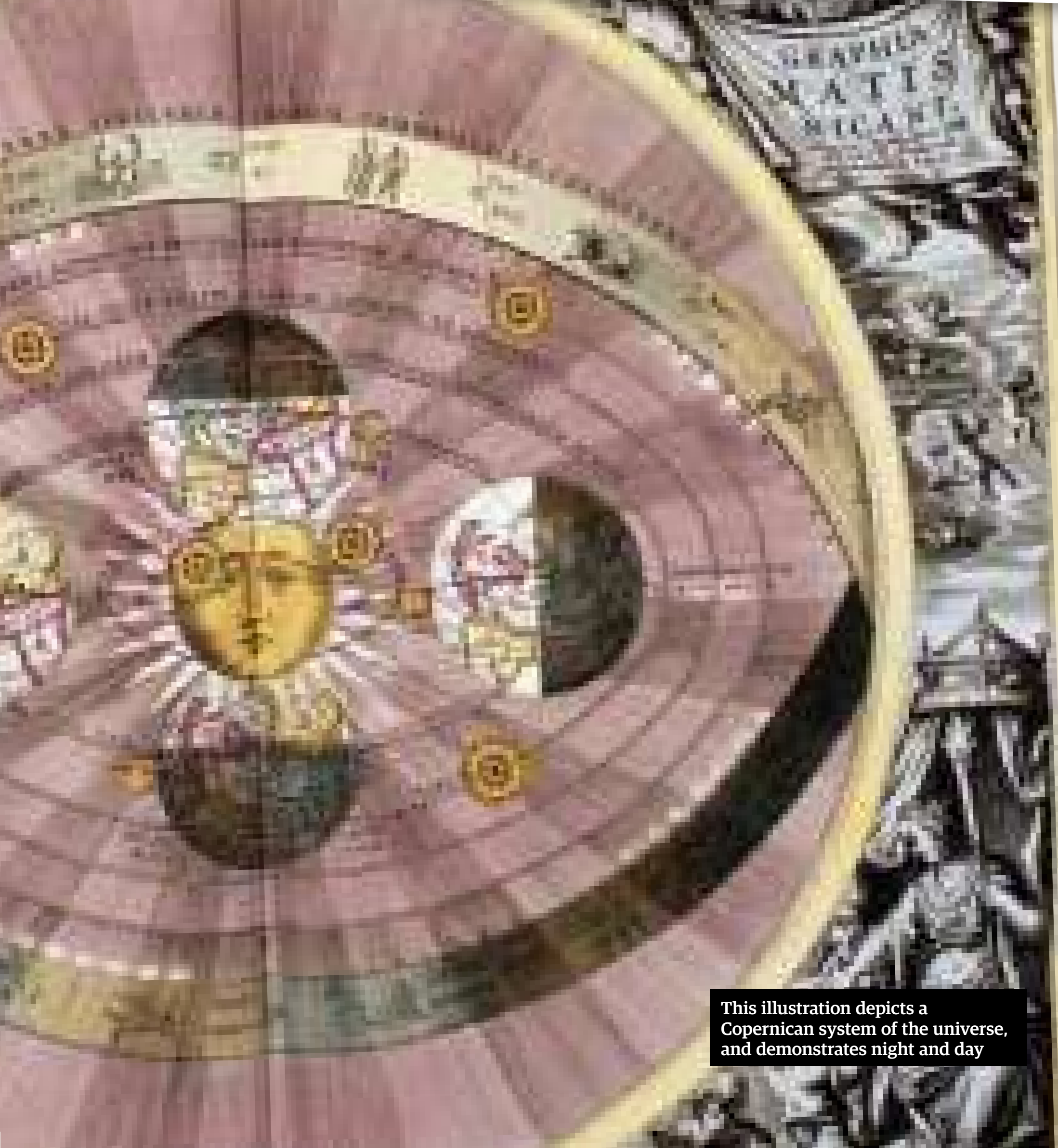
of vernacular Bibles encouraged ordinary people to think for themselves. The emphasis moved away from the performance of rituals and the veneration of holy 'things' to reflection on ideas and the embracing of personal theological beliefs. The Renaissance also presented challenging theories in the realm of science. Nicholas Copernicus, for example, produced evidence for the belief that the Earth moved round the Sun, and not vice-versa. Then in 1517, the German monk, Martin Luther, went for the papal jugular by declaring that the pope did not have power to forgive sins. This outrageous claim, backed up by proofs from the Bible, struck such a chord with so many people that it triggered the Reformation. Some zealots attacked shrines and images that represented the old religion.

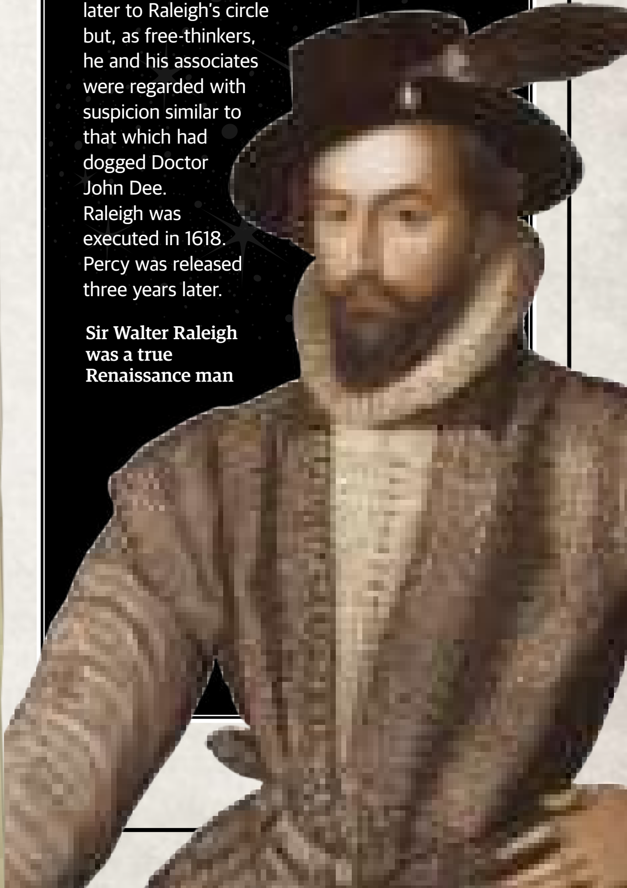
Instead of cautiously welcoming the new thinking and engaging in debate with the exponents of radical ideas and beliefs, many Church leaders dug their heels in, determined to protect Catholic tradition at all cost. They banned books that challenged official teaching. They branded all critics as heretics, demanded that they repented of their errors and they punished them if they refused. Ironically, some of the Church's fiercest critics, who would eventually be known as Protestants, actually agreed with Rome's condemnation of magic as diabolical and, in the 17th century, became some of the most ardent persecutors of witches and their ilk.


A scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, one of the more magical plays from Shakespeare


This illustration depicts a Copernican system of the universe, and demonstrates night and day

The School of Night

One of the strangest 'academies' where amateur scholars dabbled in arcane knowledge and were widely suspected of magical practices was held in a prison – and not any prison. This intellectual salon met in the Tower of London. Soon after the accession of James I in 1603, Queen Elizabeth's favourite, Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618), was arrested on suspicion of being involved in a plot against the new king. Though found guilty, his life was spared and he was lodged in the Tower. Two years later, Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland (1564-1632) was accused of complicity in the Gunpowder Plot and suffered the same fate. The conditions of their imprisonment were far from harsh. They had spacious quarters, kept servants and received visitors. They also devoted themselves to the study of philosophy, theology and astrology, being joined by scholars such as Thomas Harriot (1560-1621), the inventor of navigational instruments and an astronomical telescope. Raleigh wrote *A History of the World*, Percy amassed a large library and equipped a laboratory for carrying out alchemical experiments. All this, plus the personal reputations of the two men and the enmity of King James (who was paranoid about witchcraft) was enough to engender Faustian suspicions of probing forbidden knowledge. They were accused of atheism (in those days only scarcely less reprehensible than treason) and Percy was widely known as the 'Wizard Earl'. The term the 'School of Night' was only applied later to Raleigh's circle but, as free-thinkers, he and his associates were regarded with suspicion similar to that which had dogged Doctor John Dee. Raleigh was executed in 1618. Percy was released three years later.


Sir Walter Raleigh was a true Renaissance man

© Alamy, Getty Images

The artes magicae

In the Renaissance, the church frowned on dabbling in ceremonial magic. Soon, such practices were laid out clearly, and became known as the 'seven forbidden arts'...

Written by Dee Dee Chainey

In 1456, Johannes Hartlieb set out seven forbidden arts: magic violating canon law. These stemmed from the artes liberales - the traditional seven liberal arts - and artes mechanicae - the seven medieval practical skills.

Nigromancy was a form of black magic, or black divination, often performed at night and involving complex rituals with blood and Latin chants. Nigromancers were thought to summon demons who would do their bidding and answer their questions with these dark rituals. This later developed into the belief that necromancy (from which 'nigromancy' derives) summoned the spirits of the dead in general. Nigromancers considered themselves both learned and pious in their art. While grounded in Christian teachings of angelic beings, it was a practice banned by the church. Considered both dangerous and depraved, it was punishable by death.

Geomancy is all about divination from the shapes created when earth is flung on to the ground by the caster, be it stone, sand or dirt. Charts were used to decode the meanings of the patterns that formed as part of this popular magical art, telling the questioner whatever they needed to know.

In contrast, aeromancy is similar, but involves throwing sand - or small objects like seeds - into the air. The term covers many types of auguries that appear in the air, from shooting stars, comets, or even thunder and the shape of clouds.

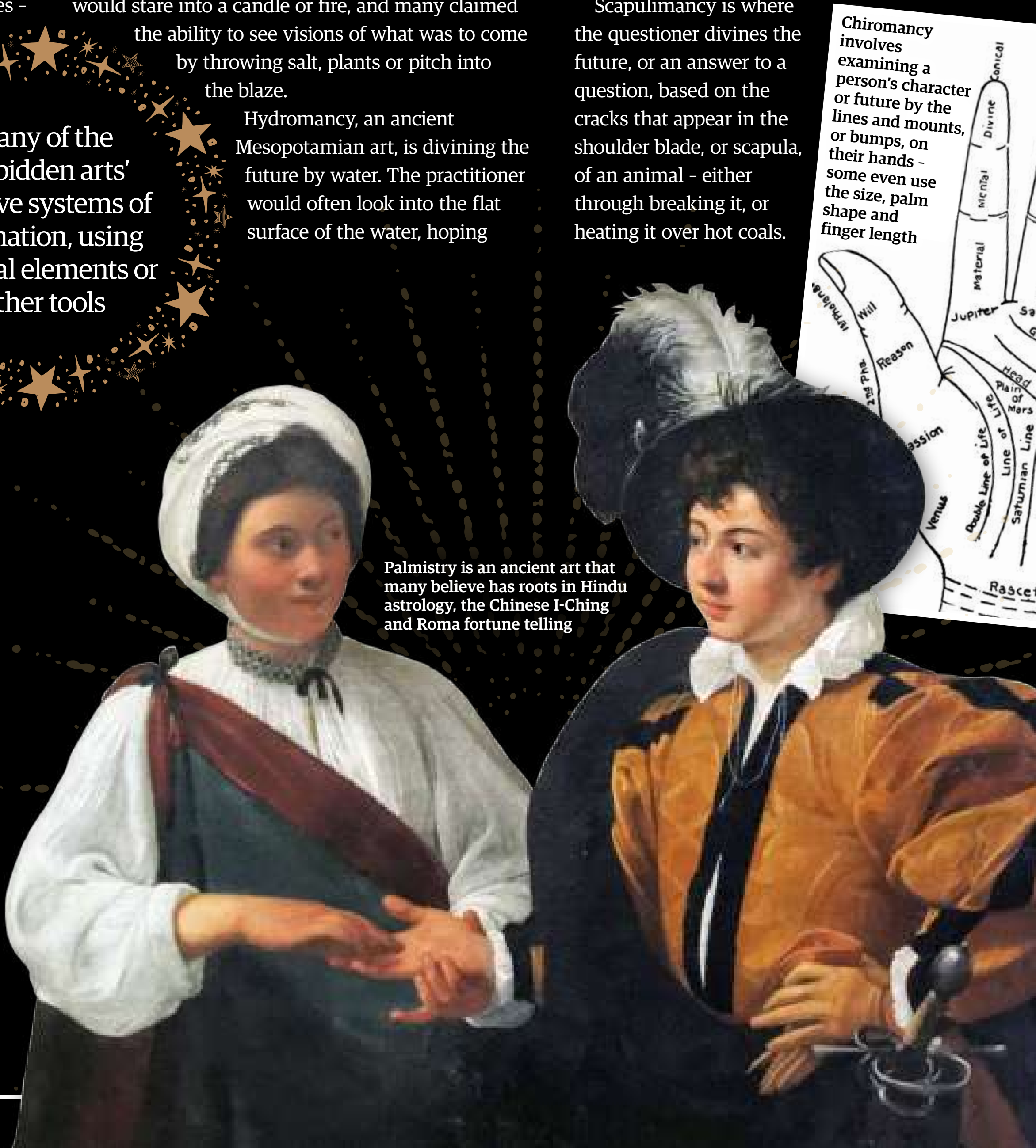
> Many of the 'forbidden arts' involve systems of divination, using natural elements or other tools

Pyromancy, too, is a means of prediction through patterns, but this time using flames. The reader would stare into a candle or fire, and many claimed the ability to see visions of what was to come by throwing salt, plants or pitch into the blaze.

Hydromancy, an ancient Mesopotamian art, is divining the future by water. The practitioner would often look into the flat surface of the water, hoping images would appear before them in the uneddied surface - this act of looking for visions is known as 'scrying'. While it saw a resurgence in the Byzantine Empire, in medieval Europe it was seen as a dark magical art, practiced only by nefarious purveyors of witchcraft.

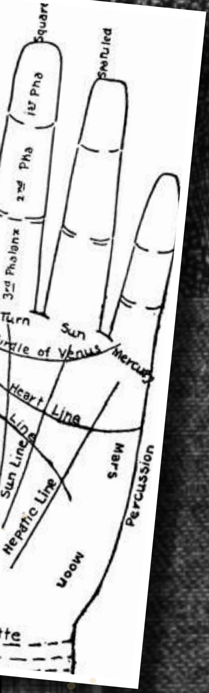
Palmistry, or chiromancy, is the art of telling someone's fortune from the lines and symbols that appear on their palms, often linked with astrological ideas.

Scapulimancy is where the questioner divines the future, or an answer to a question, based on the cracks that appear in the shoulder blade, or scapula, of an animal - either through breaking it, or heating it over hot coals.



Chiromancy involves examining a person's character or future by the lines and mounts, or bumps, on their hands - some even use the size, palm shape and finger length

Palmistry is an ancient art that many believe has roots in Hindu astrology, the Chinese I-Ching and Roma fortune telling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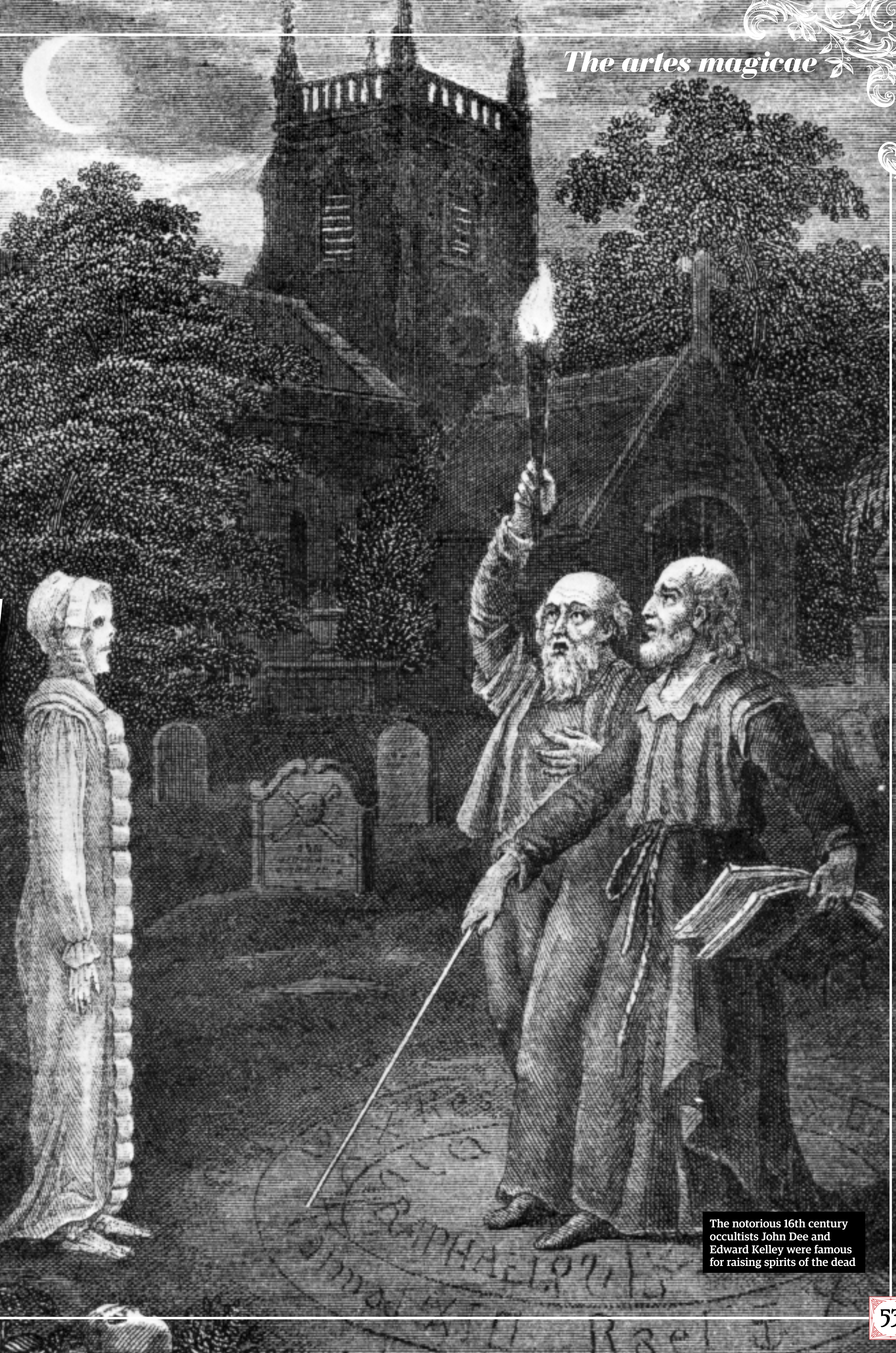
Moon



The notorious 16th century occultists John Dee and Edward Kelley were famous for raising spirits of the dead

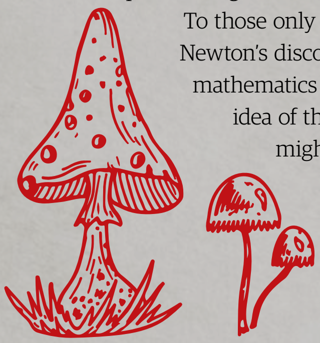
Secrets of the alchemists

Alchemists tried to find the ancient recipe for making gold and achieving immortality. None succeeded, yet modern science owes much to their techniques

Written by Erich B Anderson

In 1666, renowned English mathematician, astronomer and natural philosopher, Sir Isaac Newton, observed light entering a prism, and from this experience he made a brilliant discovery about light and colour; that white light is made up of a spectrum of several colours. He was fascinated with light, and believed that it had a close relationship to the concept that the early modern scientist knew as 'the vegetable spirit.'

Newton was constantly awed by the beauty and complexity of nature. Over time, he concluded that the massive variety of life and processes that occur in nature, such as growth and decay, meant there must be some driving force making it all happen. He believed that the 'vegetable spirit' was that force, and he thought it might be linked with the power of light.



To those only familiar with Newton's discoveries in mathematics and physics, the idea of the 'vegetable spirit' might seem strange, and even pseudo-scientific. On the other hand, this idea and several others of the famous scientist were closely associated with a subject that he is not very often known for studying, and yet spent a great amount of his time devoted to: alchemy. In his lifetime, Newton wrote around one million words on alchemy, which shows how committed he was to the practice. Through his research into alchemy, Newton hoped to uncover the secret of the 'vegetable spirit', or the spirit of life.

Even to Newton in the 17th century, alchemy was an archaic art with hundreds of texts available for him to study. But Newton was not the first person to turn to alchemy in order to find what he was looking for, and was in fact one of the last in a long line of alchemists who sought to use the art for the purpose of discovering the universe's remarkable secrets.

The primary mission of ancient and medieval alchemists was finding the way to create gold and the elixir of life. Unfortunately for them and Newton, alchemy has been shrouded in secrets and mystery throughout its existence, particularly during the medieval period. Alchemists have repeatedly defended this secrecy, stating that its purpose is to keep the spectacular knowledge hidden from unworthy individuals who might use it for nefarious gains (though today we might suspect that the true reason for the secrecy is that, from the very beginning, the goals of the alchemists were impossible to achieve).

The origins of alchemy can be traced back 2,000 years before Newton to the ancient Egyptians and Greeks. In fact, the word 'alchemy' may be derived from Khem, which was an Ancient Greek term for Egypt. Even though alchemical tradition often states that the founding father of the practice was Hermes Trismegistus, it is very difficult to tie the root of alchemy to one person. On the other hand, it is much more likely that the first proto-alchemists were Egyptian metalworkers, who would have worked with several different types of metal. It was gold that had the most value, therefore many focused their attention on this precious metal. Dyers and medicine-makers were also linked to early alchemy.

Over time, the experience of working with gold, silver and other metals led the most talented craftsmen to develop impressive alloys. Eventually, many different types of 'gold' entered the market, with major economic consequences as the manipulated metals and alloys were not in fact gold, but convincing fakes. By the time the Romans controlled Egypt, counterfeit gold had become such a problem for the imperial treasury that the Roman Emperor Diocletian (reigning between 284-305 CE) ordered the destruction of every single text

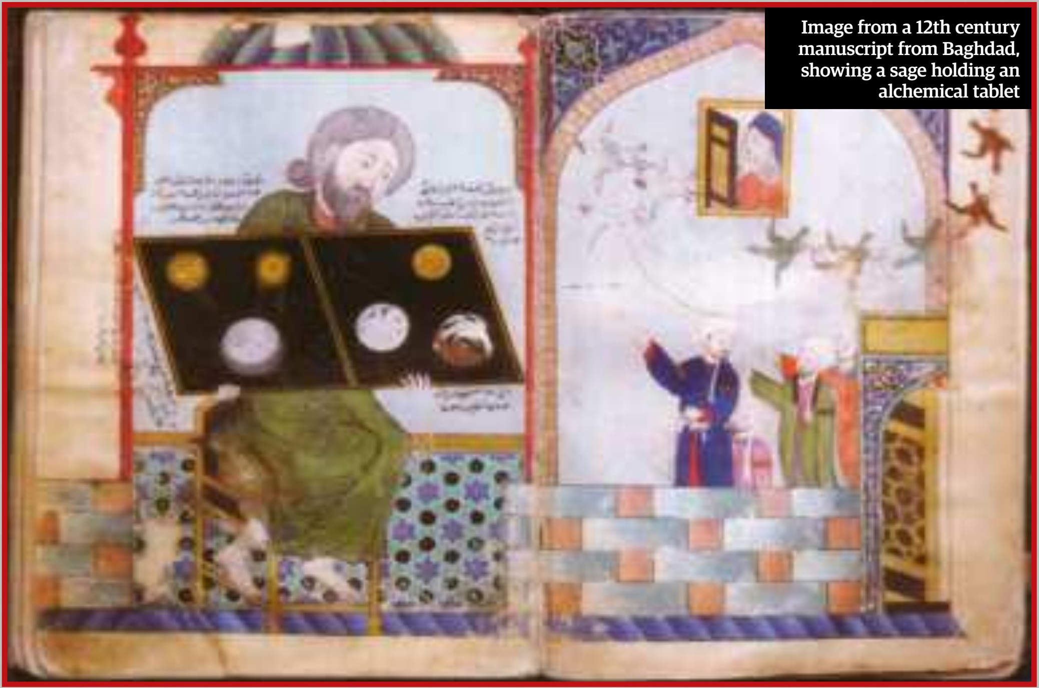
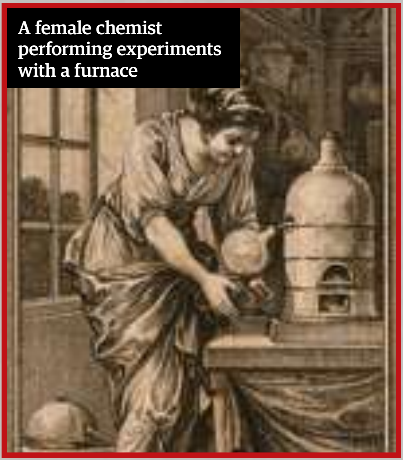
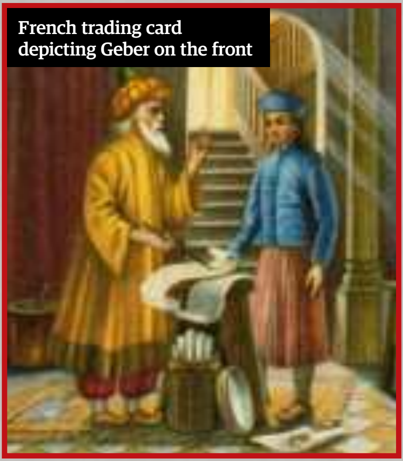


Image from a 12th century manuscript from Baghdad, showing a sage holding an alchemical tablet

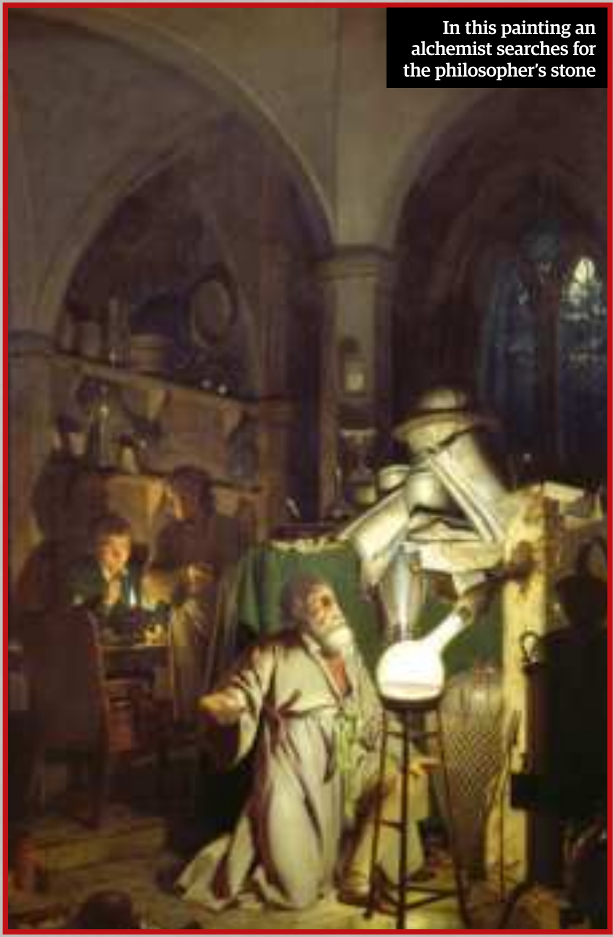
"The origins of alchemy can be traced back 2,000 years before Newton to the ancient Egyptians and Greeks"



A female chemist performing experiments with a furnace



French trading card depicting Geber on the front



In this painting an alchemist searches for the philosopher's stone

that covered the making of gold or other metalwork.

The Greeks also played an important role in the early development of alchemy. However, these men were philosophers who were more often than not thinkers rather than doers, so their contribution was primarily focused on theories involving the nature of substances. The first known alchemical documents were papyri written in Greek, often including processes and recipes in the creation of gold-like metals and alloys.

The teachings of Aristotle from the 4th century BCE made a profound impact on alchemical thought, as well as other Greek writers both before and after him. Yet it was not until Zosimos of Panopolis, who thrived c.300, that numerous alchemical texts began to emerge, which differed from the earlier papyri. In the writings of Zosimos, the practice of alchemy became less straightforward and more vague. For instance, he began to speak in riddles and used phrases whose meaning is difficult to determine. Zosimos may have been one of the first alchemists to conceal his ideas through secrecy and symbolism, but he started a tradition that later became central to the alchemical world.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century, the Islamic conquests made the Arabic civilisation one of the chief powers of the world. In this golden age of Islamic culture, Arabic scholars worked diligently to translate earlier Greco-Roman texts and assimilate as much of their ancient knowledge as possible. Especially after Egypt fell under Arabic control, documents that covered alchemy were also discovered and incorporated into the works of the early Islamic scholars. It is often thought that the term 'alchemy' was actually created in this period, because it combined the word 'Khem' with the Arabic definite article 'al-', such as in the words 'alcohol' and 'algebra'. Furthermore, the key to immortality - which was just as important to alchemists as gold creation - is known as the elixir of life, from the Arabic word 'al-iksir'.

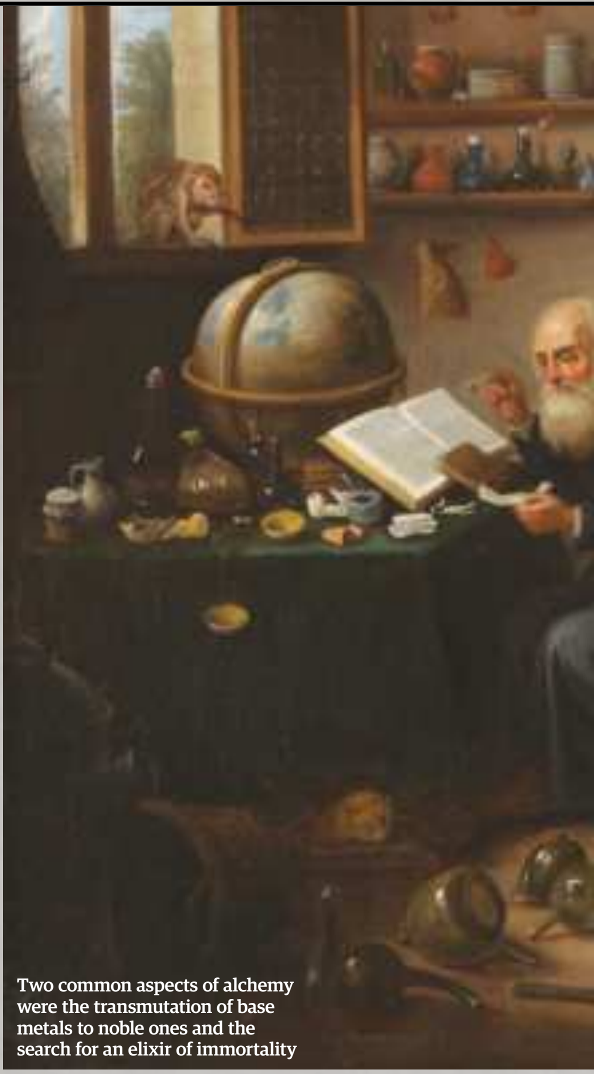
The most prominent Arabic alchemist was Jábir ibn Háyyan, or Geber to western Europeans, of c.760 CE. From the writings of Aristotle, Geber theorised that metals were created from a combination of mercury and sulphur, which became a fundamental aspect of alchemy. After Geber, the physician and philosopher Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyya Al-Razi (or

Rasis) dealt with alchemy during the 9th century, followed by Abu Ali ibn Sina (or Avicenna) in the 10th century. Once the works of these men and other Arabic scholars reached the Latin-literate West, interest in alchemy was reignited throughout medieval Europe.

Albertus Magnus, a Dominican from Swabia, was the primary scholar responsible for reintroducing alchemy to Europe in the 13th century. Albertus supported the mercury-sulphur theory of Geber, and although he believed that transmutation (the changing of matter into another form) was possible, he admitted it was very difficult to do. In 1244-5, Thomas Aquinas became the pupil of Albertus, and the master taught him what he knew, including his knowledge of alchemy. The other major alchemist of the 13th century, Roger Bacon, wrote about two different kinds: practical and theoretical. Bacon praised the first type for he truly believed that, if done right, the processes could improve metals and make them better than the state in which they are found in nature.

Albertus, Bacon and the other prominent alchemists of the era all believed that transmutation could be achieved, especially with metals. However, none of them could prove it. It was during this time that the philosopher's stone began to increasingly appear within alchemical texts. Since transmutation was possible according to the alchemists, many began to believe that they simply lacked one vital ingredient to make the process work, which was the stone. And as the idea of the stone became more popular, so too did the alchemical texts become increasingly more difficult to interpret, as riddles, symbolism and coded language became more and more prevalent.

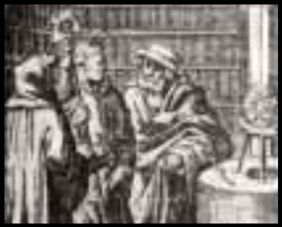
It is basically impossible to know exactly what the philosopher's stone was, or would have been, because there have been so many different theories written about the substance. Some alchemists believed that the stone was comprised of the old common alchemical ingredients of mercury and sulphur, along with the new addition of salt, but with one major twist; these components were not just simply mercury, sulphur and salt, but rather special substances in a pure state with magical qualities, commonly referred to as the 'essences' of mercury, sulphur and salt.



Two common aspects of alchemy were the transmutation of base metals to noble ones and the search for an elixir of immortality

Legendary alchemists

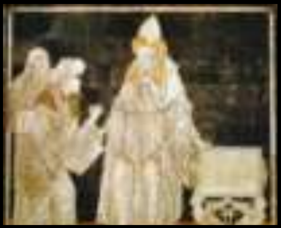
The major figures of alchemy from the ancient world to the Renaissance



Thomas Norton with Abbot Cremer and Basil Valentine

Thomas Norton

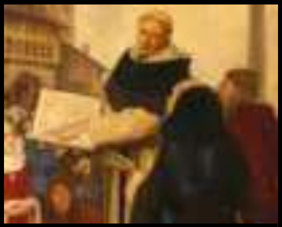
Thomas Norton, who lived from c.1433-1513, was the disciple of another famous English alchemist called George Ripley. As an alchemist, Thomas was supposedly successful in creating the elixir of life not once but twice, only to have it stolen from him on both occasions; however, he is most well-known as an alchemist for writing the *Ordinal Of Alchemy.*



15th-century depiction of Hermes Trismegistus

Hermes Trismegistus

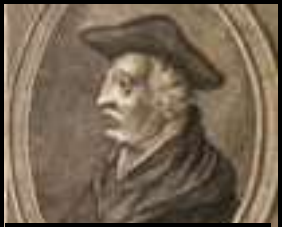
Hermes Trismegistus is often considered to be the founder of ancient alchemy. Although he was most likely a mythical figure, he was believed by many to have lived at the same time as Moses. Other theories about his mysterious origins depict him as a god descended from the Greek god known as Hermes. The early 14th century treatise *De Mineralibus*, attributed to Albertus Magnus, is the first Western text to mention him.



Albertus Magnus describing his scientific theories to others

Albertus Magnus

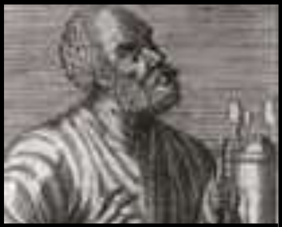
Born at the beginning of the 13th century, Albertus Magnus was a Dominican who was given the title of Doctor Universalis by the Catholic Church, as he was the most prominent scholar of his time in the natural sciences. He was considered to be a theologian, inventor, astrologer and magician, but known to later alchemists as chief expert in alchemy during the early medieval era. Outside of alchemy, Albertus gained fame as the teacher of St Thomas Aquinas.



18th-century portrait engraving of Roger Bacon

Roger Bacon

A Franciscan, Roger Bacon was also the first Englishman of any renown to study and practise alchemy. A contemporary of Albertus, Bacon lived from c.1220-1292 and was known as a magician and miracle-worker, but he was also a major supporter of pure experimentation, and wanted to improve upon the scientific methods of the time. Works attributed to Bacon were some of the first to lead alchemists on the quest for the philosopher's stone.



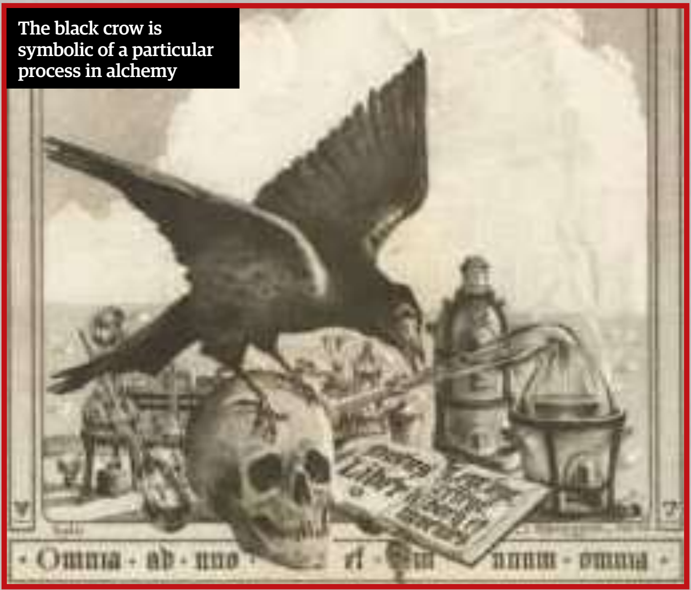
Depiction of the Arabian alchemist Jábir ibn Háyyan

'Geber' or Jábir ibn Háyyan

Known by Latin speakers of the West as Geber, many works on alchemy were attributed to Jábir ibn Háyyan. It is possible that he lived during the 8th century when the Arabs were discovering and translating ancient Greco-Roman texts, therefore he contributed to this. His work the *Summa Perfectionis Magisterii* was the primary source of information on chemicals for most of medieval Europe, but it may have been the work of another alchemist.

There were other theories about the makeup of the stone, too. Similar to Newton's idea of the 'vegetable spirit', some alchemists thought of the philosopher's stone as the seed of gold that could be obtained from the metal. To the medieval mind, metals were similar to vegetation, in that they both grew in the earth. Therefore, metals had seeds and the most precious seed of all was that of gold.

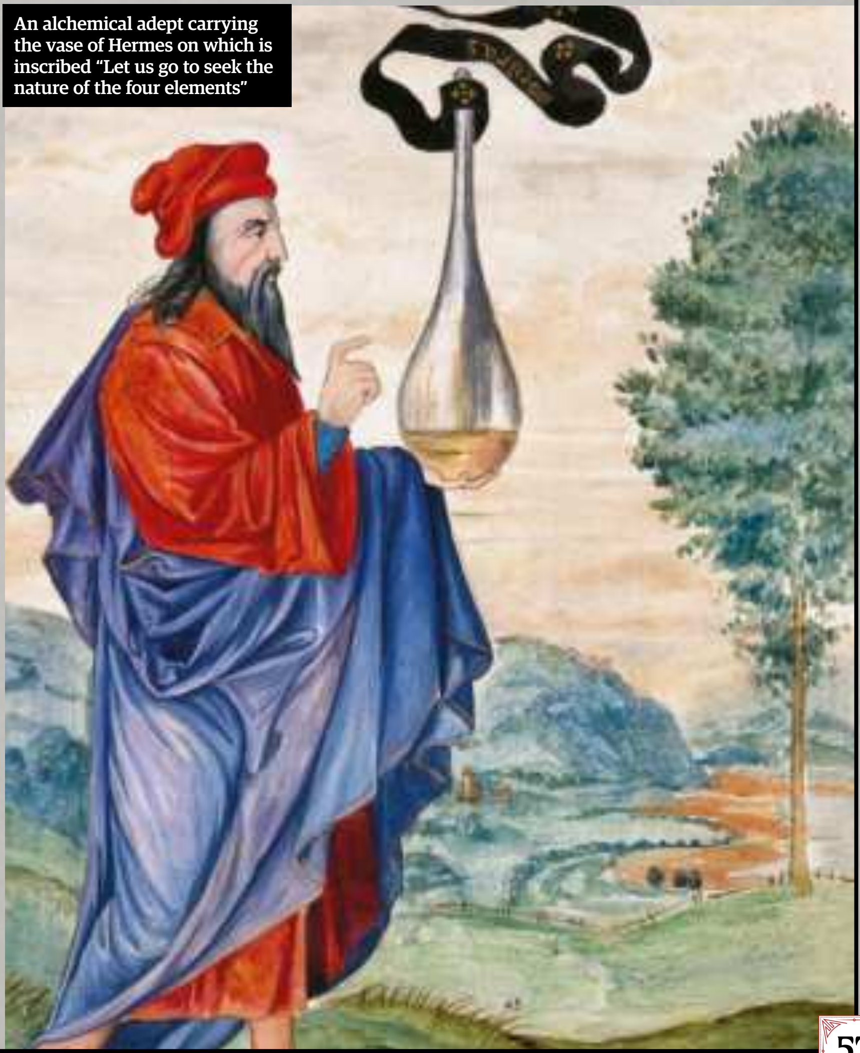
Regardless of the increasing secrecy surrounding alchemy, hundreds of alchemists from many different backgrounds were desperate to find or manufacture whatever was necessary in order to obtain the philosopher's stone. Since the incredible substance could be used to serve the purpose of creating gold and the elixir of life, some alchemists sought enormous wealth, some desired fame, and others wanted the key to never-ending life, while there were some who had the grand aspirations of flooding the market with so much gold that the economic system would collapse and the world would be turned upside down. There were those who did gain fame or notoriety for their alchemical exploits, yet all of the other dreams were never fulfilled. In the end, the failures of others did not



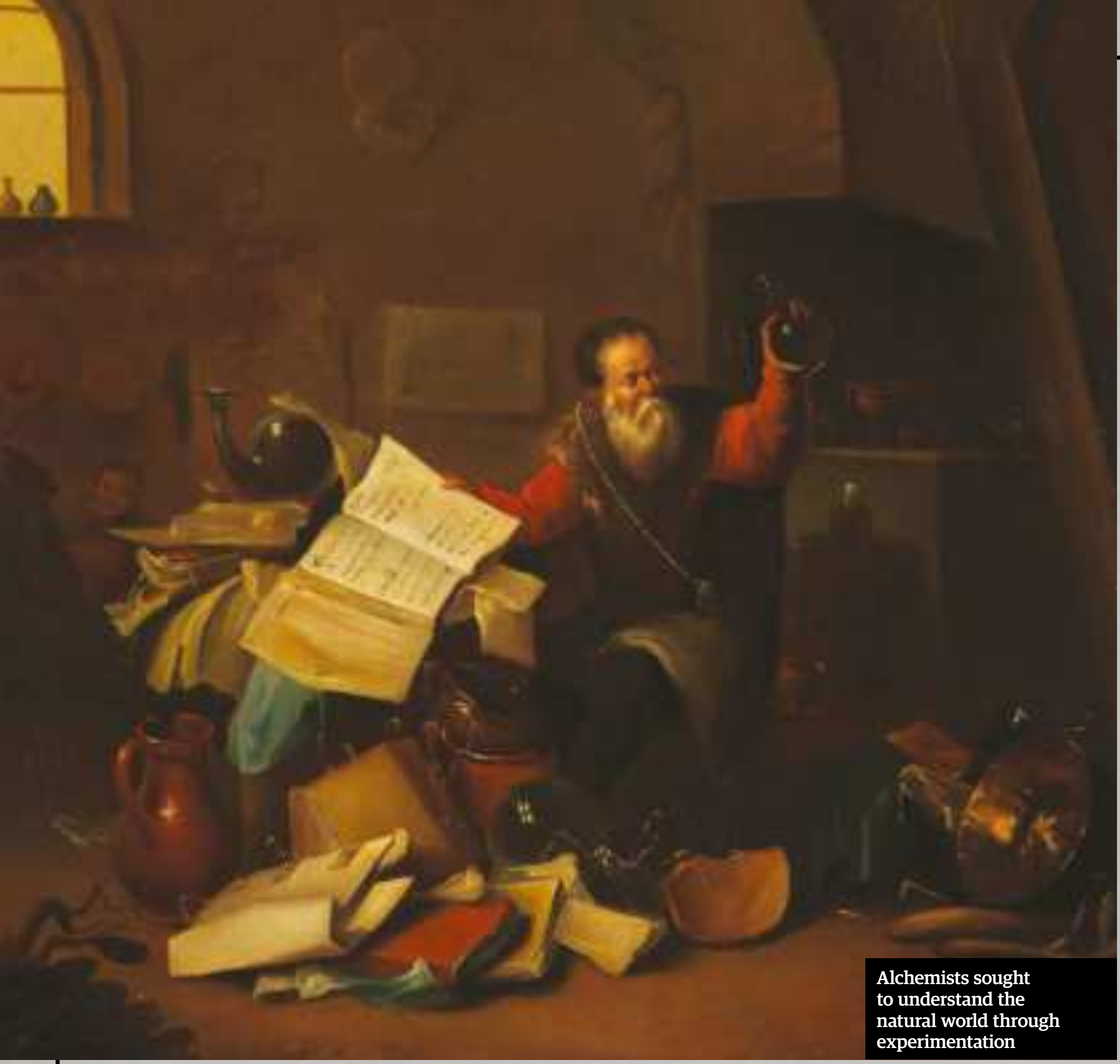
The black crow is symbolic of a particular process in alchemy

Omnia · ab · uno · et · in · unum · omnia

> "These components were special substances in a pure state with magical qualities"



An alchemical adept carrying the vase of Hermes on which is inscribed "Let us go to seek the nature of the four elements"



Alchemists sought to understand the natural world through experimentation

stop the alchemists, especially at a time when the supposed success stories achieved a legendary status that carried a lot more weight than the numerous average practitioners who simply faded into obscurity over time after years without success.

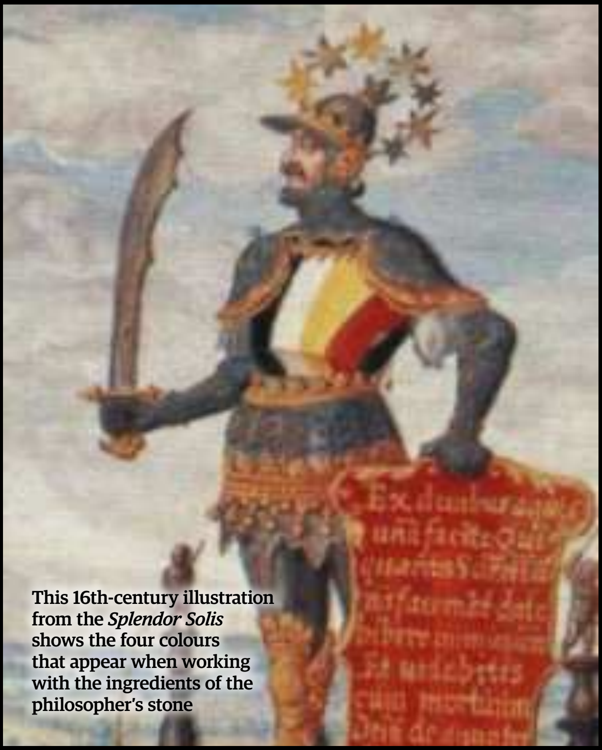
The alchemists who still focused on the quest either attempted to interpret the substantial corpus of texts, or conducted their own experiments in a laboratory. The heating of metals and other substances was a fundamental part of their work; therefore, the furnace was the core to the alchemist's laboratory. This work area was also filled with many different types of utensils, tools and other equipment, such as beakers, crucibles, flasks, phials, jars, pestles and mortars, ladles, strainers and filters. As the alchemists worked hard in order to achieve their impossible goals, they constantly made improvements to the various apparatus that they used. Centuries later, much of this same equipment was incredibly important to the first chemists, and could often be found in their laboratories as well. The inventors of many items of scientific equipment were alchemists.

"There were those who did gain fame or notoriety for their alchemical exploits"

Materials and methods

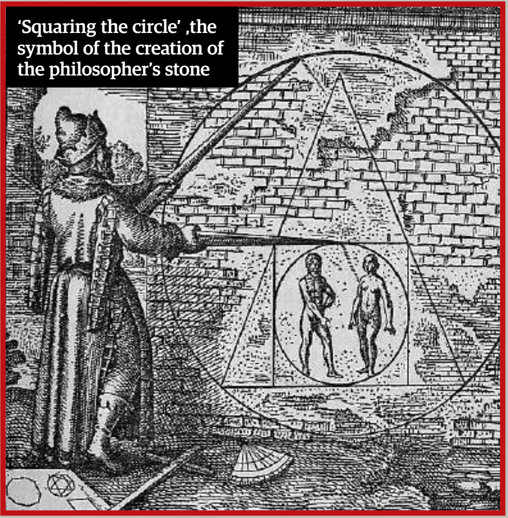
For the practical alchemists, many different methods and a wide range of equipment were essential

All alchemists frequently used their furnaces to heat metals and other substances, but they also literally tried to test every single other process they could think of, some of which seem quite absurd today. This was primarily due to their lack of understanding about the true nature of metals. For instance, Geber believed that matter could be changed into its perfect form by mixing it with a pure, perfect substance. Essentially, alchemists considered this method as the fermentation of gold by leavening it with base metals in order to achieve their goal. Other common processes used were pulverisation, solidification, distillation, sublimation, mortification and calcination. The furnace fire was used for methods like calcination, which broke down solid substances into powder, but heat was not always utilised. Alchemists distilled many different types of liquids in their experiments, such as vinegar, egg yolks and even horse manure. Acid was also commonly used in the laboratory to dissolve ingredients like silver and mercury. And outside of the laboratory, some alchemists hoped to achieve their goal by exposing their work to the Sun for long periods of time. Alchemists did acknowledge at times that there were limits to what they could accomplish. One example is that experts knew they could not simply change a dead thing into a living thing. On the other hand, alchemists did believe that if they returned the dead item into its original form as simple matter first, it was then possible for it to be changed into its opposite form (that is, living).



This 16th-century illustration from the *Splendor Solis* shows the four colours that appear when working with the ingredients of the philosopher's stone

Page from a 17th-century book by Descartes – early science owed much to alchemical work

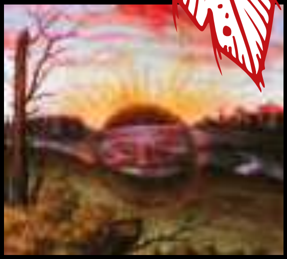


'Squaring the circle' ,the symbol of the creation of the philosopher's stone

Secrets and symbols

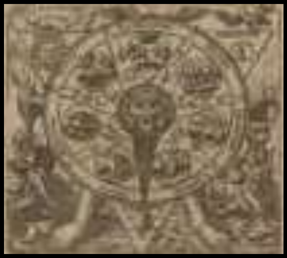
To ensure knowledge was kept from the unworthy, manuscripts were filled with symbols and codes

The Dark Sun



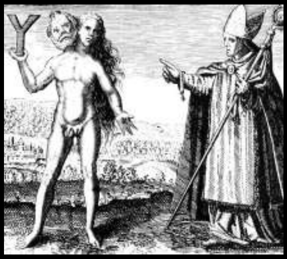
One of the lesser-known alchemical symbols, the Dark Sun, or sol niger, is symbolic of change, essential to the goals of transmutation that alchemists worked towards. It can also be linked to the blackening of matter, or even putrefaction. This image is from the *Splendor Solis*, a 16th-century German book of colourful watercolour images with symbolic significance, relating to alchemical processes and ideas. Though the images date from later in alchemy's medieval history, their style is reminiscent of much earlier alchemical images.

The Four Elements

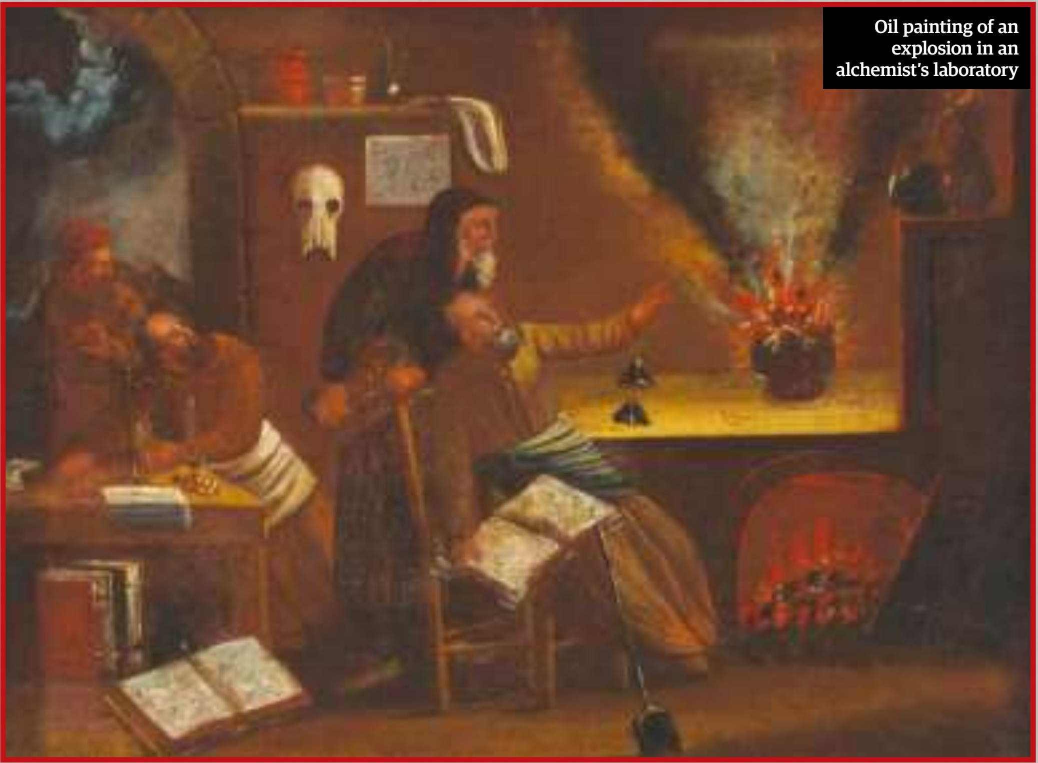


This symbolic emblem from the 17th century shows the four key elements – air, water, earth and fire – at its edges. Alchemists believed that if they could master the different aspects of the four elements, they could create whatever they wished to make, including gold and the elixir of life. The triangle within these corners symbolise the 'tria prima' or three primes, which were mercury, sulphur and salt. The alchemist Paracelsus believed that combinations of these three substances made up all metals.

The Great Hermaphrodite



An engraving from the 17th-century work *Symbola Aureae Mensae* by Michael Maier, which depicts Albertus Magnus pointing to the alchemical symbol of the hermaphrodite. The image expresses a common idea found in many alchemical texts that everything has both a uniting, singular nature, but is comprised of two parts. Alchemists believed that harmonisation of these opposing forces (such as wet and dry, Sun and Moon, male and female) could hold the key to the power of creation they sought. The hermaphrodite symbolises this union.



Oil painting of an explosion in an alchemist's laboratory

Alchemy remained very popular and indeed respectable well into the Renaissance, with many other important individuals emerging on the scene, including Arnald of Villanova and Ramon Llull in the 13th century, George Ripley and Thomas Norton in the 15th century, and then Thomas Charnock in the 16th century, to name just a few. However, during the beginning of the early modern era, the art gradually began to lose its prestige.

Advancements in metallurgy that led to the discovery of the true nature of metals was one of the first causes, followed by many other scientific breakthroughs, which over time made so-called pseudo-sciences like alchemy and astrology obsolete. By the 17th century, Newton was at the forefront of this new scientific age, yet even a forward thinker like him used the ancient knowledge of alchemy to uncover the secrets of life. Today, ancient alchemy has a fitting place in history as the crucible of science.

An alchemist's laboratory

A sanctuary for seekers of the philosopher's stone

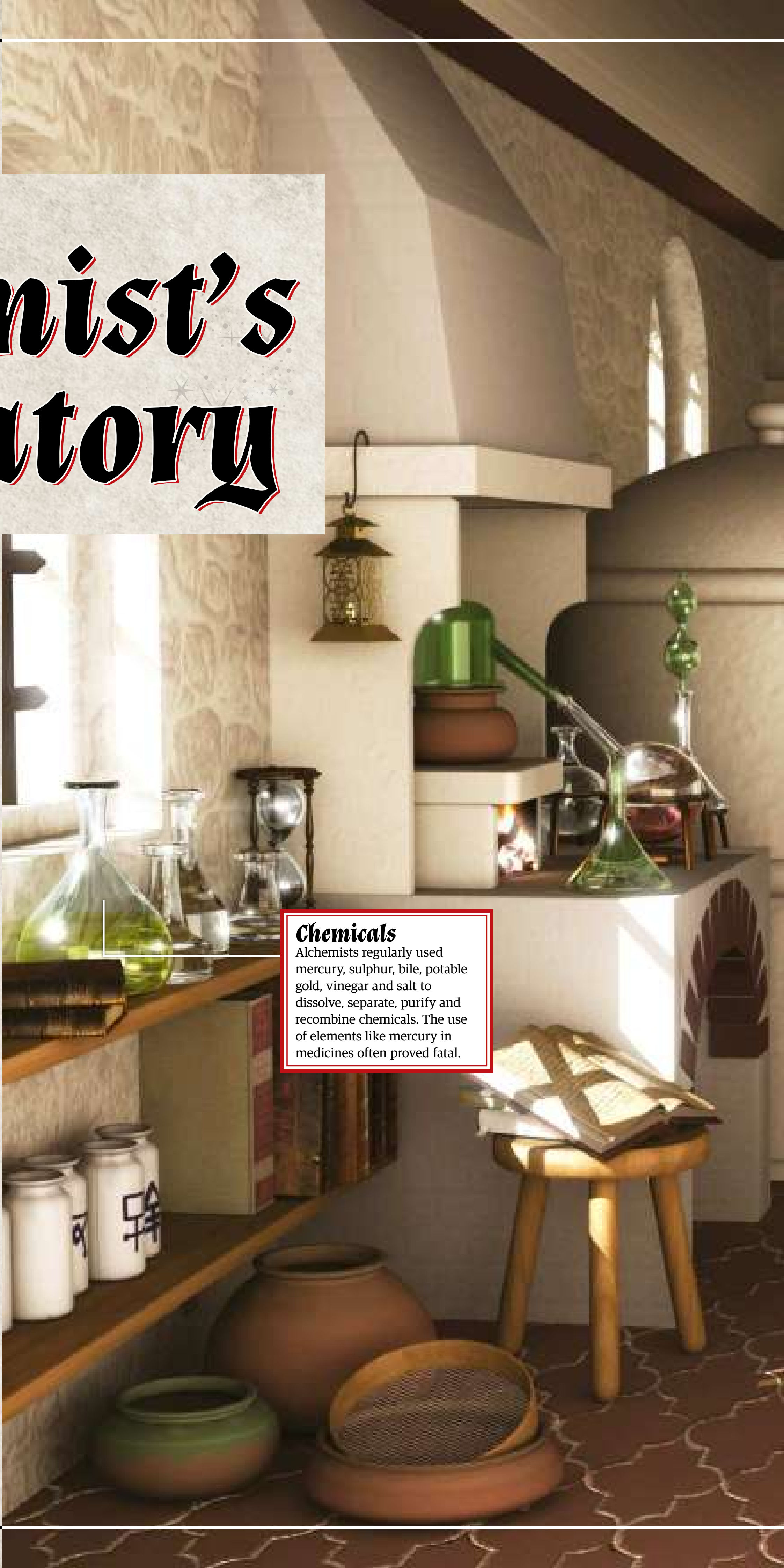
16th-17th century

Europe

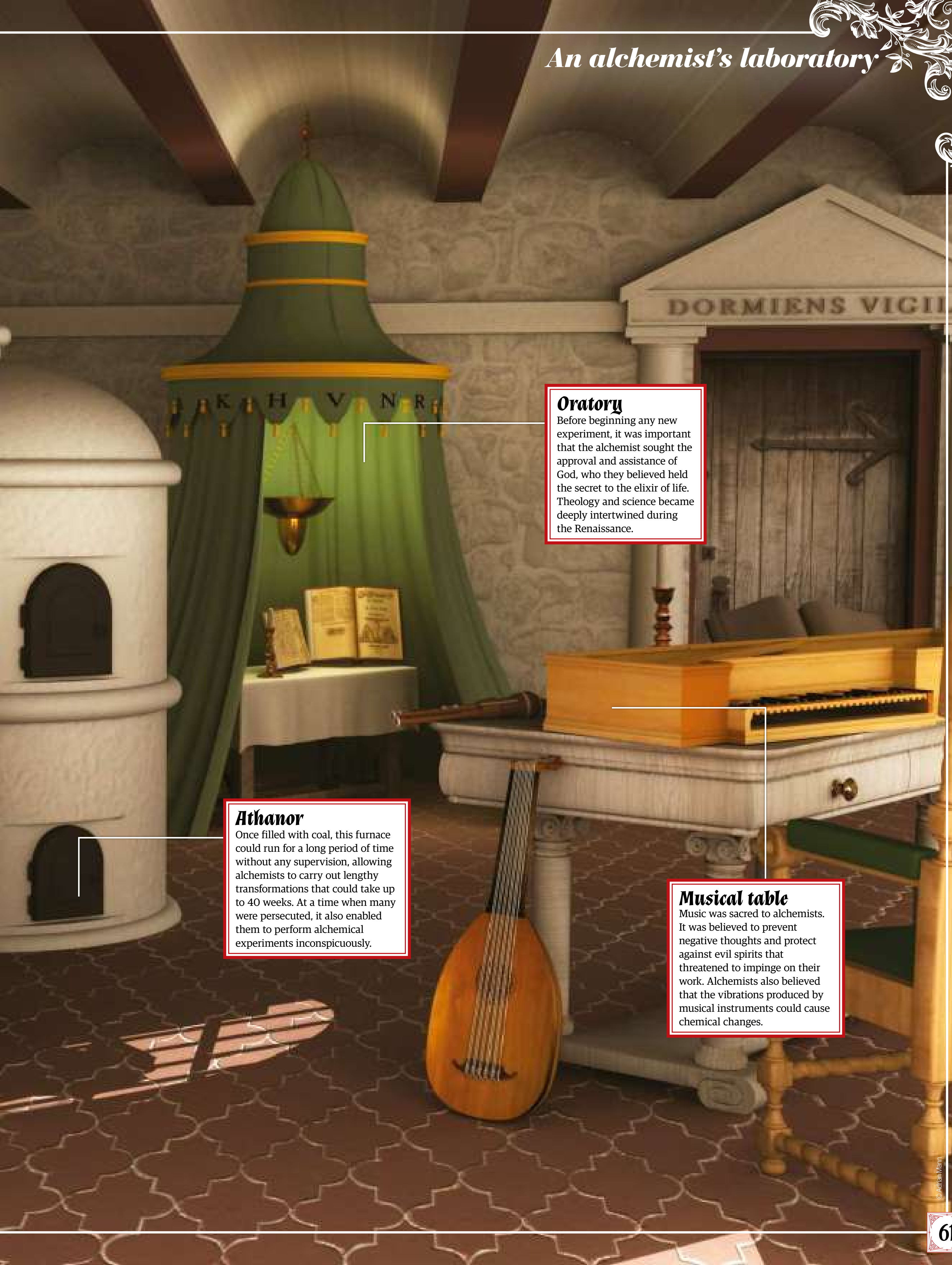
Few scientific disciplines defined the complexity of the Renaissance as much as alchemy, an area where philosophy, science, theology and magic came together. The tradition dates back to Hellenistic Egypt, where ancient alchemists attempted to create artificial gemstones and turn base metals into gold and silver. By the Middle Ages, the practice had spread to Europe, where theologians encouraged its reconciliation with Christianity. It was believed that minerals and other substances could affect the human body - if the secret of purifying gold could be learned, then the technique could be used to purify the soul and gain entry to Heaven.

With the birth of the Renaissance, alchemy became an entrepreneurial pursuit, with many receiving large payouts from the nobility for their medical services, the production of precious metals, and, of course, the 'elixir of life'. Fraudsters began to cash in on the craze, using magicians' tricks and misdirection to 'create' gold in order to attract sponsorship and court favour. Those who were exposed were imprisoned, tortured or executed, and some were punished for witchcraft and devil worshipping in particularly gruesome ways.

But it wasn't just the alchemists themselves who suffered from their science. Customers seeking cures for their ailments were often treated with metals like mercury and lead, with fatal outcomes.



Chemicals
Alchemists regularly used mercury, sulphur, bile, potable gold, vinegar and salt to dissolve, separate, purify and recombine chemicals. The use of elements like mercury in medicines often proved fatal.



Oratory

Before beginning any new experiment, it was important that the alchemist sought the approval and assistance of God, who they believed held the secret to the elixir of life. Theology and science became deeply intertwined during the Renaissance.

Athanor

Once filled with coal, this furnace could run for a long period of time without any supervision, allowing alchemists to carry out lengthy transformations that could take up to 40 weeks. At a time when many were persecuted, it also enabled them to perform alchemical experiments inconspicuously.

Musical table

Music was sacred to alchemists. It was believed to prevent negative thoughts and protect against evil spirits that threatened to impinge on their work. Alchemists also believed that the vibrations produced by musical instruments could cause chemical changes.

© Adrian Mann

John Dee

Occultist, mathematician, philosopher or spy: what lurked beneath the man who spanned the gap between magic and science?

Written by Willow Winsham

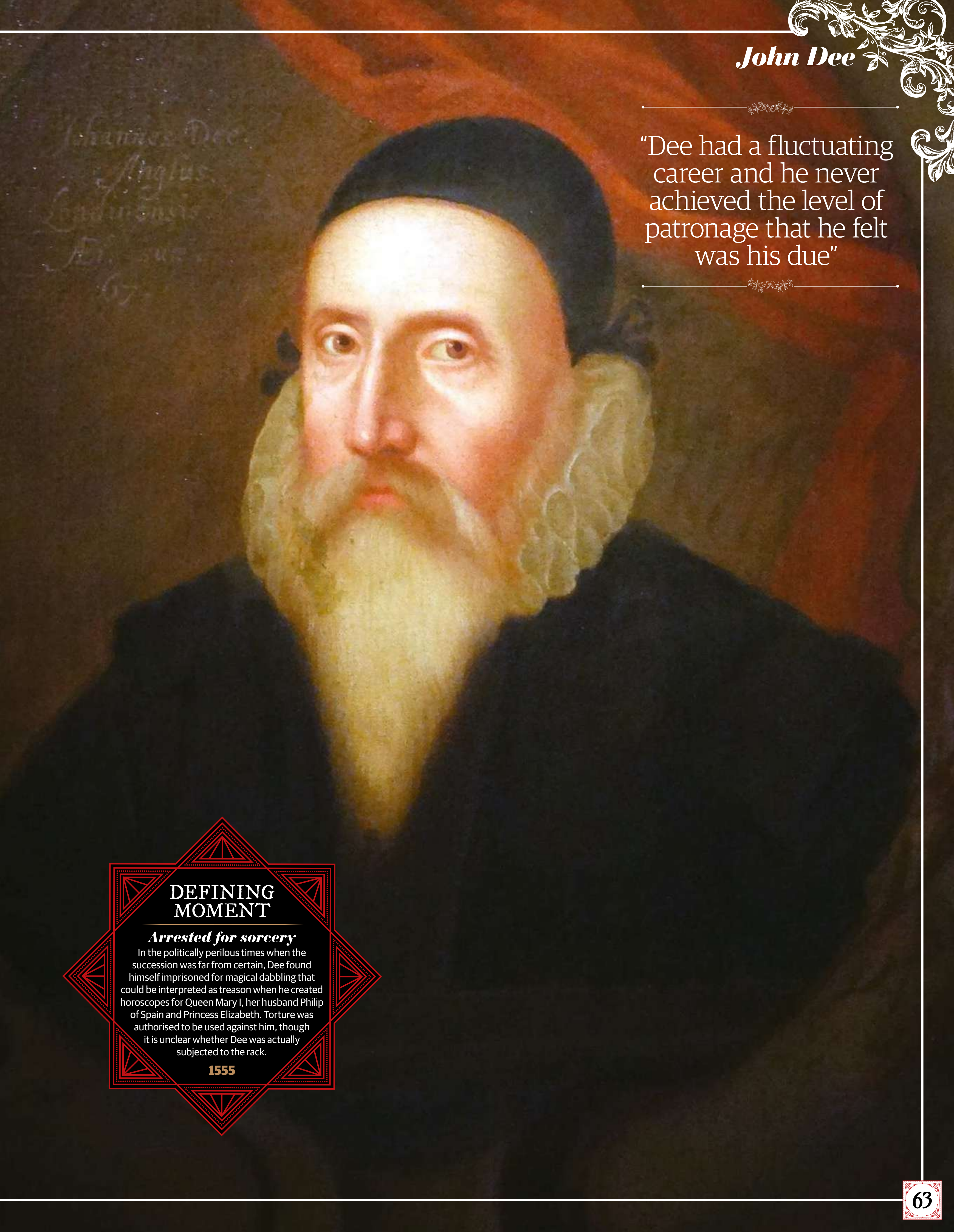
The London-born John Dee was actually of Welsh descent, his family having made a place for themselves in the capital after the accession of a fellow Welshman, Henry VII, to the English throne. Over the years, the young and ambitious Dee invented a lineage that was far grander than his true humble beginnings, claiming a family connection with various Welsh princes, and even suggesting descent from the fabled King Arthur himself.

Dee gained his Bachelor's degree in 1545 from Cambridge. During his time at university, he had his first brush with the occult, in the form of alchemical studies, and came across the mathematical concepts that would become the basis of many of his later ideas. By the time he left university for good, he had already established something of a reputation in this area, though this did not stop him from taking Holy Orders in 1554.

Trouble erupted in 1555 when Dee was engaged by Queen Mary Tudor to use his already established skills to see what lay in store for herself and her half-sister, Princess Elizabeth. He found himself in hot water when on 28 May, he and his associates were arrested on suspicion of magic, a charge that rapidly escalated in the volatile political climate of the time to that of conjuring and witchcraft. Despite the potentially fatal situation, Dee was eventually cleared of all charges, and emerged as household chaplain to Edmund Bonner, Bishop of London.

Upon the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558, Dee's fortunes appeared to be improving. The new monarch was said to have chosen her coronation date based on a horoscope that Dee had cast for her and he was generally held in favour by the Queen. Despite this seemingly auspicious start and the connection he had with Elizabeth throughout his life, Dee had a fluctuating career and he never achieved the level of patronage and recognition that he felt was his due.

By the 1560s, the mystically inclined Dee had fully embraced the occult and arcane, and in 1564 he produced a work titled *The Hieroglyphic Monad*, exploring the meaning of a glyph that he himself had created. Ever hopeful, he dedicated the decidedly dense text to Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II, though again it did not bring the rewards Dee had hoped for. More success came from his attempts to have references to himself as a conjuror removed from Foxe's highly popular work, *Acts And Monuments*: the critical comments were removed from later editions of the text, though his reputation in the wider world could not be changed so easily.



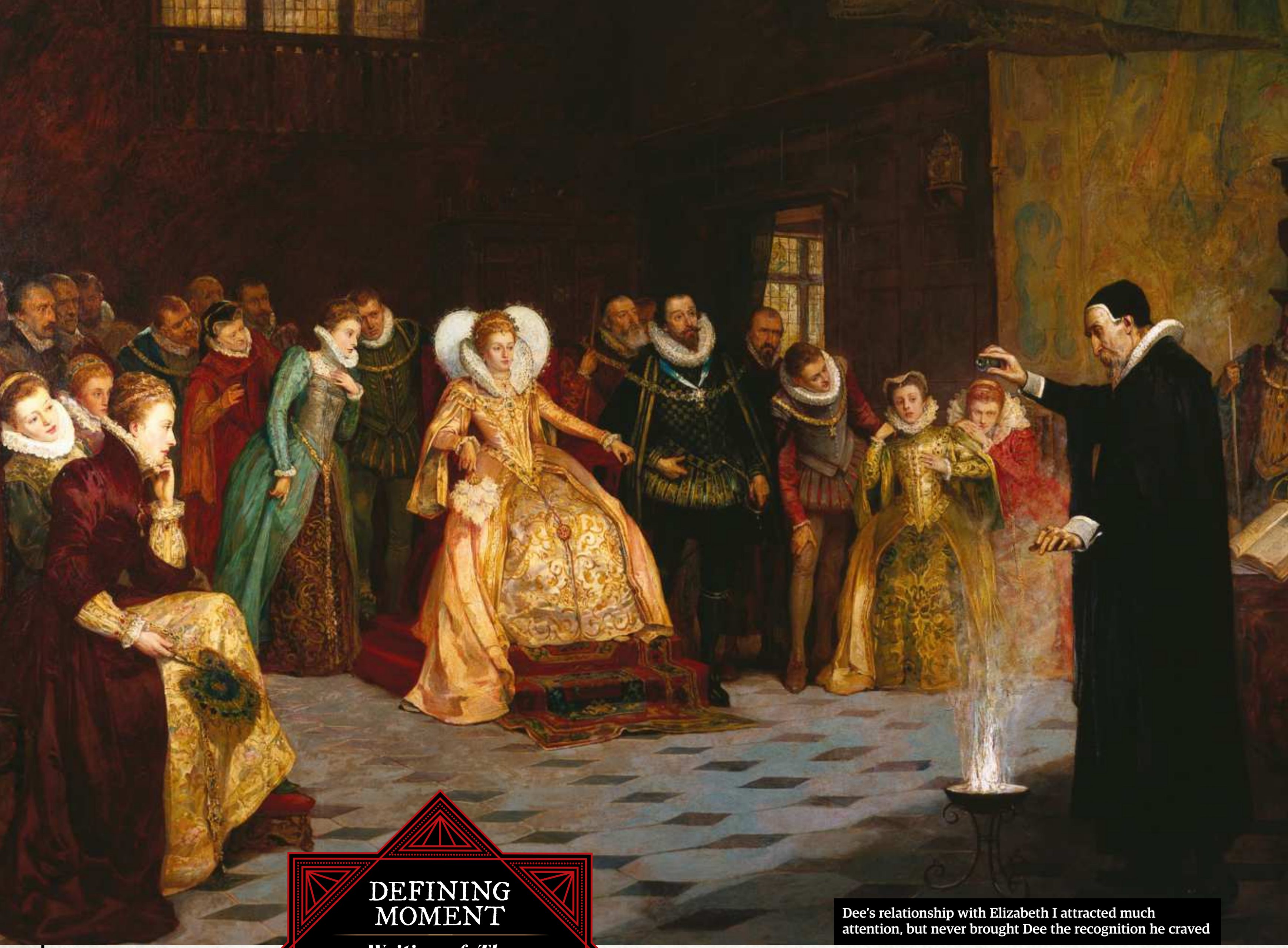
“Dee had a fluctuating career and he never achieved the level of patronage that he felt was his due”

DEFINING MOMENT

Arrested for sorcery

In the politically perilous times when the succession was far from certain, Dee found himself imprisoned for magical dabbling that could be interpreted as treason when he created horoscopes for Queen Mary I, her husband Philip of Spain and Princess Elizabeth. Torture was authorised to be used against him, though it is unclear whether Dee was actually subjected to the rack.

1555


Dee's relationship with Elizabeth I attracted much attention, but never brought Dee the recognition he craved

DEFINING MOMENT

Writing of The Hieroglyphic Monad

Dee produced many works throughout his life, covering mathematics, philosophy and the occult, but it was this work, written in 12 days, that was considered most important by his contemporaries and continues to intrigue and confuse readers today. This work is taken as evidence of the link between Dee and Rosicrucian ideas.

1564

Dee was also vociferous in his support of English expansion in the New World, and he devoted much time and effort to this cause, attempting to boost England's claims over those of Spain in the continuing battle for supremacy over the territory. In 1577 he published *General And Rare Memorials Pertaining To The Perfect Art Of Navigation*, outlining his ambitious ideas regarding England's developing empire. As was the case with so many of his visions, however, the majority of his ideas in this area were not adopted.

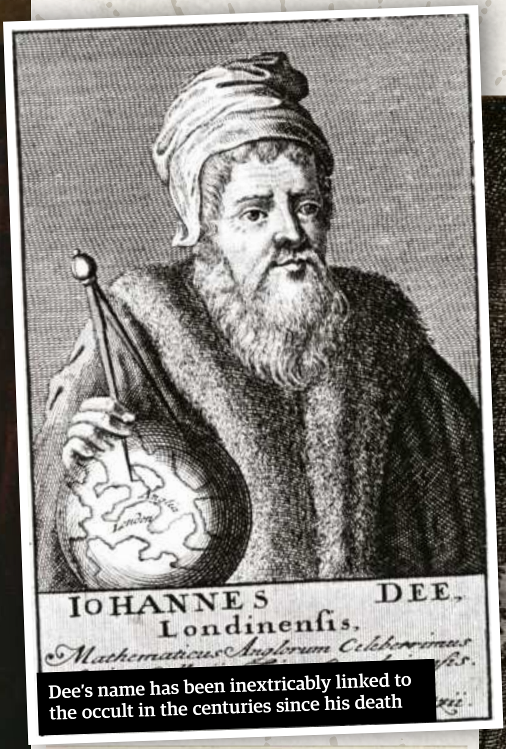
A great lover of books, Dee turned his attentions to developing a private library in his Mortlake home. He expanded it into a great wonder, including many texts of an occult nature, and it was known as one of the leading libraries in Europe and the largest personally owned library in England during his lifetime. The great fascination of the occult coupled with a burning desire for greater recognition was again made clear in 1574, when Dee wrote to William Cecil, Lord Treasurer to Elizabeth I. Dee apparently claimed to have knowledge of hidden treasure in the Welsh Marches, hinting at his ability to recover it for the right patron.

The 1580s saw Dee into his fifties and signalled a change of direction, as he finally acknowledged his disappointment about his lack of advancement. As such, Dee switched his attentions even more fully towards the occult, and it was now that he devoted himself to communicating with spirits and angels. For this work he required a partner skilled in the art of crystal gazing to act as go-between for the two worlds and, after impressing him at an audition, Dee finally settled on the unlikely choice of convicted criminal Edward Kelley.

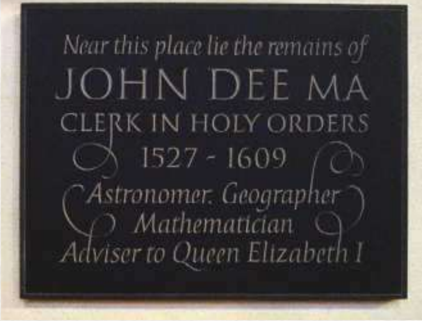
Their attempts were deemed successful, and Dee fully believed that, through Kelley, they had made contact with angels. These communications were meticulously recorded by Dee. Despite his links with the occult, he was a devout Christian, and prayer and fasting played a large role in his spiritual communications. His motives were also not, arguably, entirely selfish – he believed, apparently wholeheartedly, that what he was learning through Kelley and the angels would be profitable to the entire human race.

Kelley was not the only questionable individual to whom Dee was drawn in his lifetime; it was during this decade that Dee, at the behest of Albert Leski, a Polish nobleman, was induced to uproot his family, along with Kelley, and move to Poland. The whole situation soon fell apart, as it transpired that Leski didn't have a penny to his name and was even further from favour at his native court

> "He believed… that what he was learning through Kelley and the angels would be profitable to the entire human race"

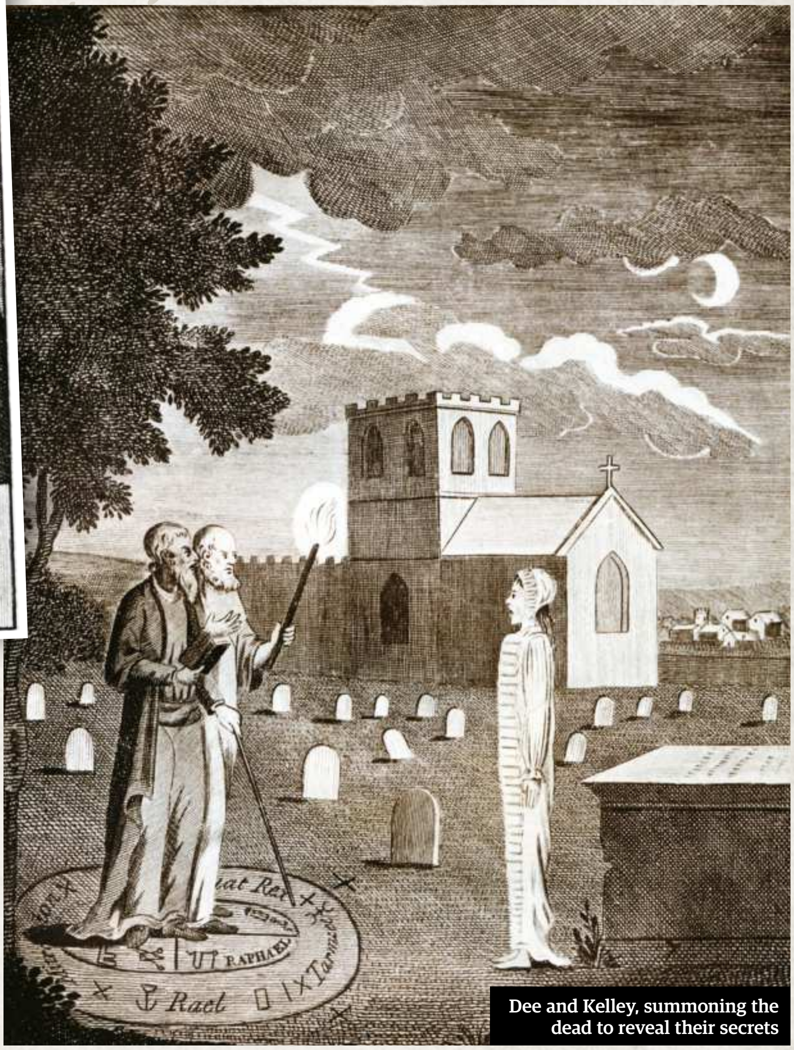


Dee's name has been inextricably linked to the occult in the centuries since his death



Near this place lie the remains of
JOHN DEE MA
CLERK IN HOLY ORDERS
1527 - 1609
Astronomer. Geographer
Mathematician
Adviser to Queen Elizabeth I

A memorial plaque for Dee, hung inside St Mary the Virgin Mortlake in 2013



Dee and Kelley, summoning the dead to reveal their secrets

than Dee felt at his own. Instead of returning home however, Dee, with the ever-present Kelley and their families, embarked upon a tour of Europe. They continued their angelic communications (indeed it had been the angels that told them, according to Kelley, to go to Poland with Leski in the first place). The pair attempted to interest some great names in their work with angels, holding an audience with Emperor Rudolf II and King Stefan Báthory of Poland. Even here Dee lost out; while he focused on angelic communication, Kelley's skill at alchemy saw his eventual appointment as chief alchemist to the Emperor.

It was this time in Europe that helped promote Dee's lingering reputation as a spy in the pay of Elizabeth I. Despite being greatly respected for his intellectual abilities, there was an ever-present suspicion from the monarchs he approached.

As the decade neared an end, relations between Kelley and Dee began to deteriorate. This was not helped by the younger man - Kelley was nearly 30 years Dee's junior - announcing that one of their angel communicators had declared that the men must share everything in common - including, much to Dee's consternation - their wives. Although it appears that this arrangement was entered into, Dee and Kelley parted company not long afterwards - though there continues to be some dispute as to the parentage of the child born nine months later to Dee's third wife.

His long absence from home had serious consequences. The house at Mortlake was in a sorry state due to vandalism, and his precious library had been ransacked. The political and religious environment to which he returned was also not very welcoming, the tide having turned against the occult beliefs that Dee held so dear and leaving him with even less hope of gaining favour. Despite this he was granted the role of warden at Christ's College, Manchester in 1595, but the 68-year-old Dee didn't manage to properly benefit even here as he was not held in any great respect by those he kept watch over. He also came under fire for his involvement with the exorcist craze that gripped the capital around that time, and for his apparent connection to John Darrell, as well as claims of fraudulent possession. All of this meant that any hopes of further promotion or advancement were completely dashed by the end of the affair.

Rumours still persist to this day, but it is highly unlikely that Dee was a member of the Rosicrucian Order, and in fact there is no hard evidence that the Order even existed during Dee's lifetime. Along with some of the more extreme claims regarding Dee, the factual truth does very little to hamper the persistent legends surrounding this learned and intriguing figure.

Dee fared little better when James I followed Elizabeth on the throne, and the new monarch was not interested in supporting the famed occultist. Dee went on to live out his years in poverty and died in c.1609 at Mortlake, under the care of his daughter Katherine.

DEFINING MOMENT

Meeting Edward Kelley

Dee's relationship with Kelley defined a large portion of his life, the younger man facilitating Dee's desire to explore angelic communication and leading him deeper into the world of the occult. Several texts were dictated by the angels through Kelley and faithfully recorded by Dee, which provided valuable insights into their work together.

1582

© Alamy, Thinkstock

Magic mirrors &

From seeing the future in still pools to images rising from the flames of burning coals, the art of scrying dates back centuries

Written by Dee Dee Chainey

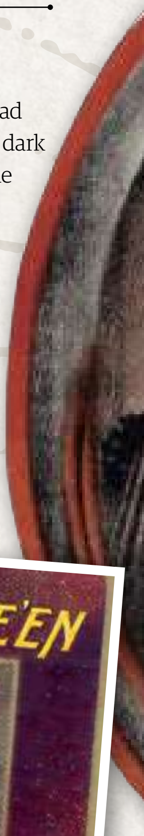
> "The aim of scrying is to set an object in front of you and wait for visions"

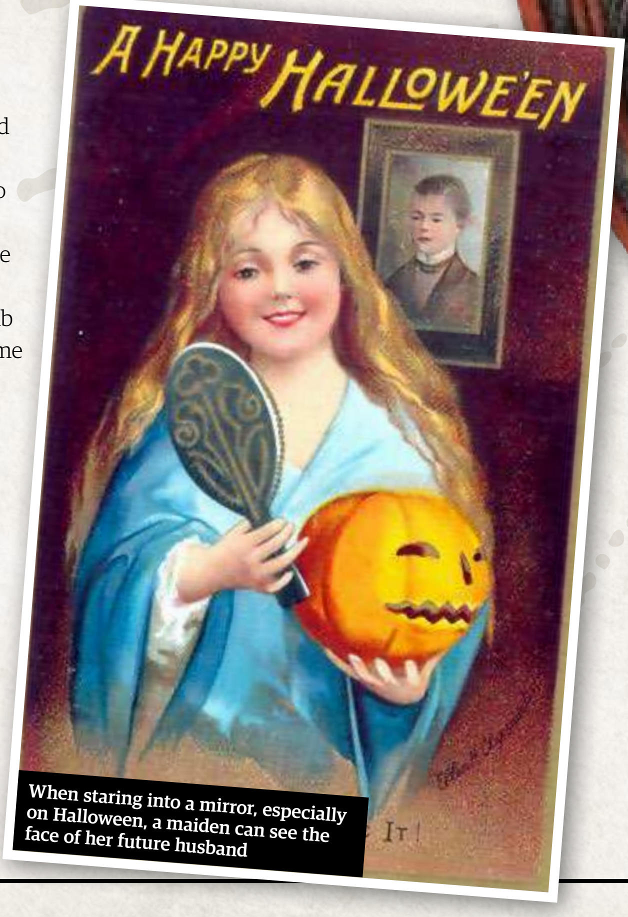
In the early 20th century, people believed divination to be of two sorts. One is natural, when the questioner's soul is entirely at peace and collected - not diffused throughout the organs of the body - and thus able to tap into an innate knowledge of the future that all humans may have through dreams or ecstatic trance. The other sort is through the use of a device, like ceremony, or an object, like a mirror, with scrying. Unlike divination, scrying does not depend on ceremony or set rituals, but is a type of fortune-telling that anyone can undertake. The aim of scrying is to set an object in front of you - like a fire, clouded crystal ball or reflective surface such as a mirror or still pool of water - and wait for visions to rise up from the depths, giving clues to the future or insights into the past. For some, scrying involves obtaining a trance-like state, with the object acting as a focus through which to clear the mind, allowing images and visions to appear. These images are interpreted, often intuitively, by the scryer. Some say spirits, or even God himself, illuminates these messages though the object.

> Reflective surfaces, such as water, mirrors, glass, and various types of crystal, are common scrying tools

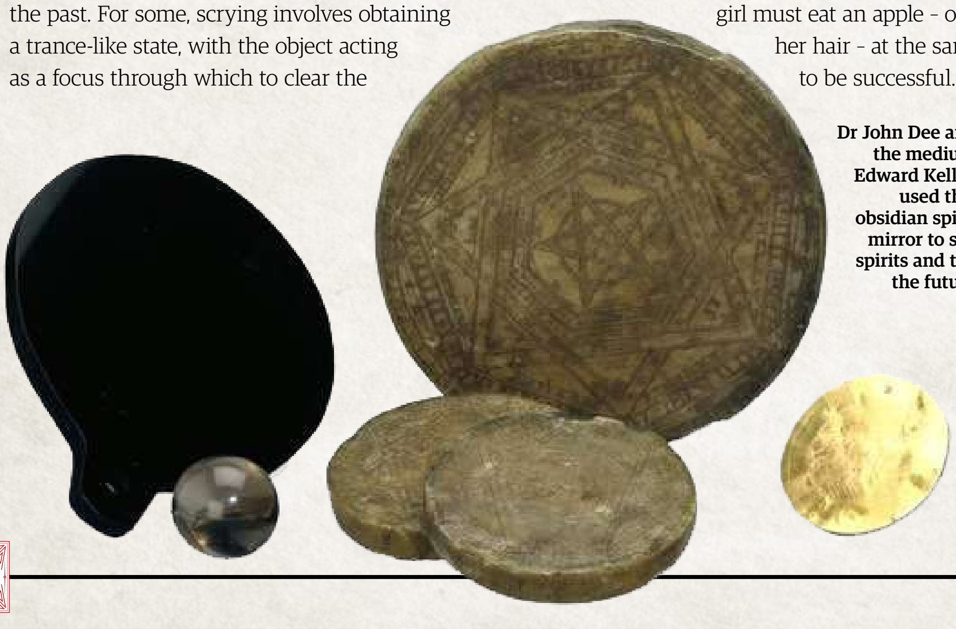
The art comes with a dizzying array of terms for specifying the medium through which the practitioner sees their visions: hydromancy for water; anthracomancy by hot coals; spheromancy is crystal gazing. Catoptromancy, or enoptromancy, is the art of scrying with mirrors. In the 16th century, John Dee notoriously owned a pear-shaped mirror of black obsidian, through which his assistant, Edward Kelley, would see visions of angels, and images telling the future. In the Victorian era, staring into a mirror on Halloween to reveal the face of your intended was all the rage for young women. Some suggest it should be lit only by a candle, and the girl must eat an apple - or comb her hair - at the same time to be successful. One version of this was to run up and down the road three times, then look into a hand-mirror. In a dark twist, the girl will die before her marriage if she glimpses a skull instead of a beau's face.

More recently, this innocent act has taken on a sinister guise. The 'Bloody Mary' urban legend says that you can summon the eponymous ghost by staring into a mirror by candlelight and chanting her name 13 times. She will reveal the future, but only once the questioner has endured her screaming or cursing at them; she might even kill them by strangling them or drinking their blood!



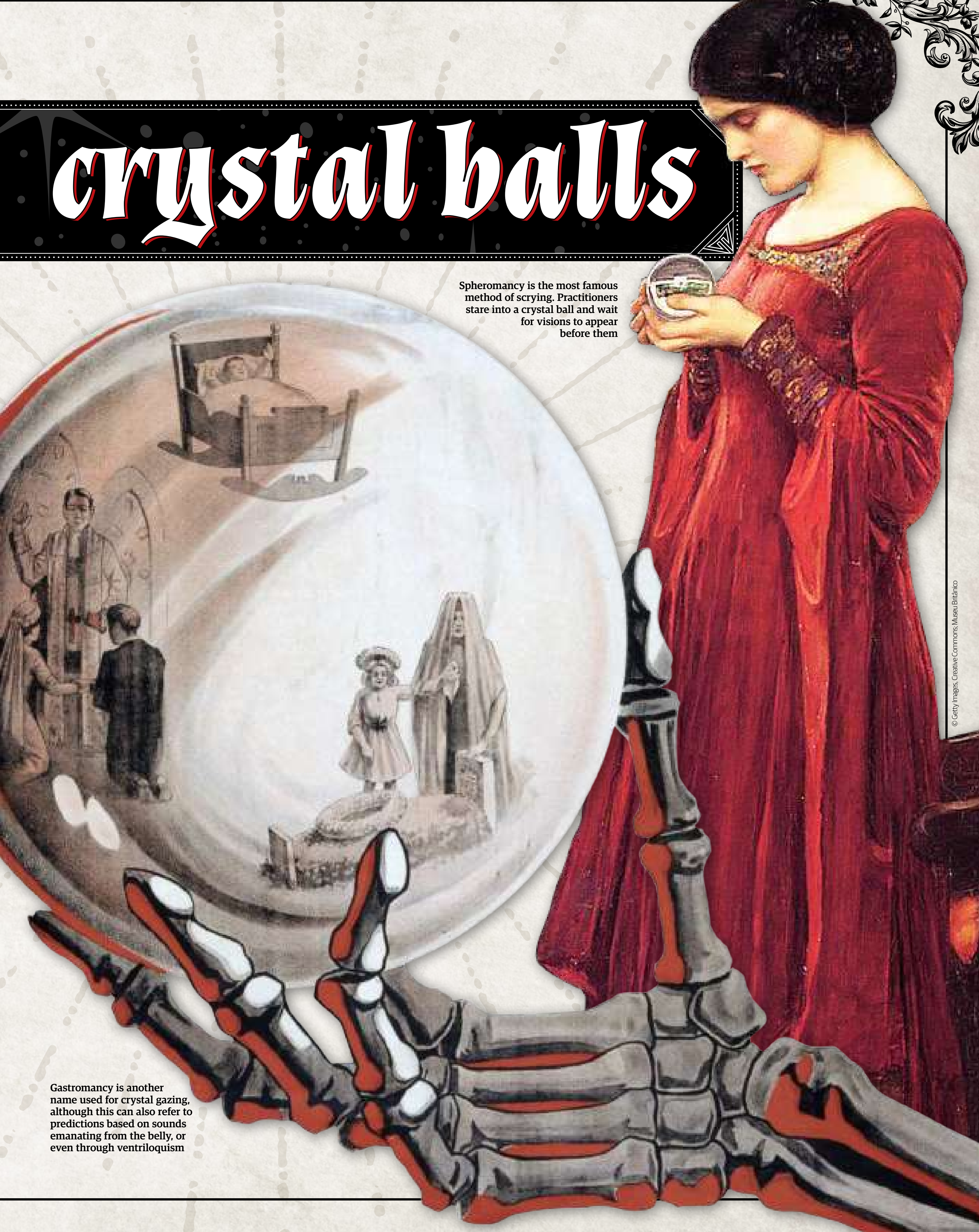


When staring into a mirror, especially on Halloween, a maiden can see the face of her future husband



Dr John Dee and the medium Edward Kelley used this obsidian spirit mirror to see spirits and tell the future

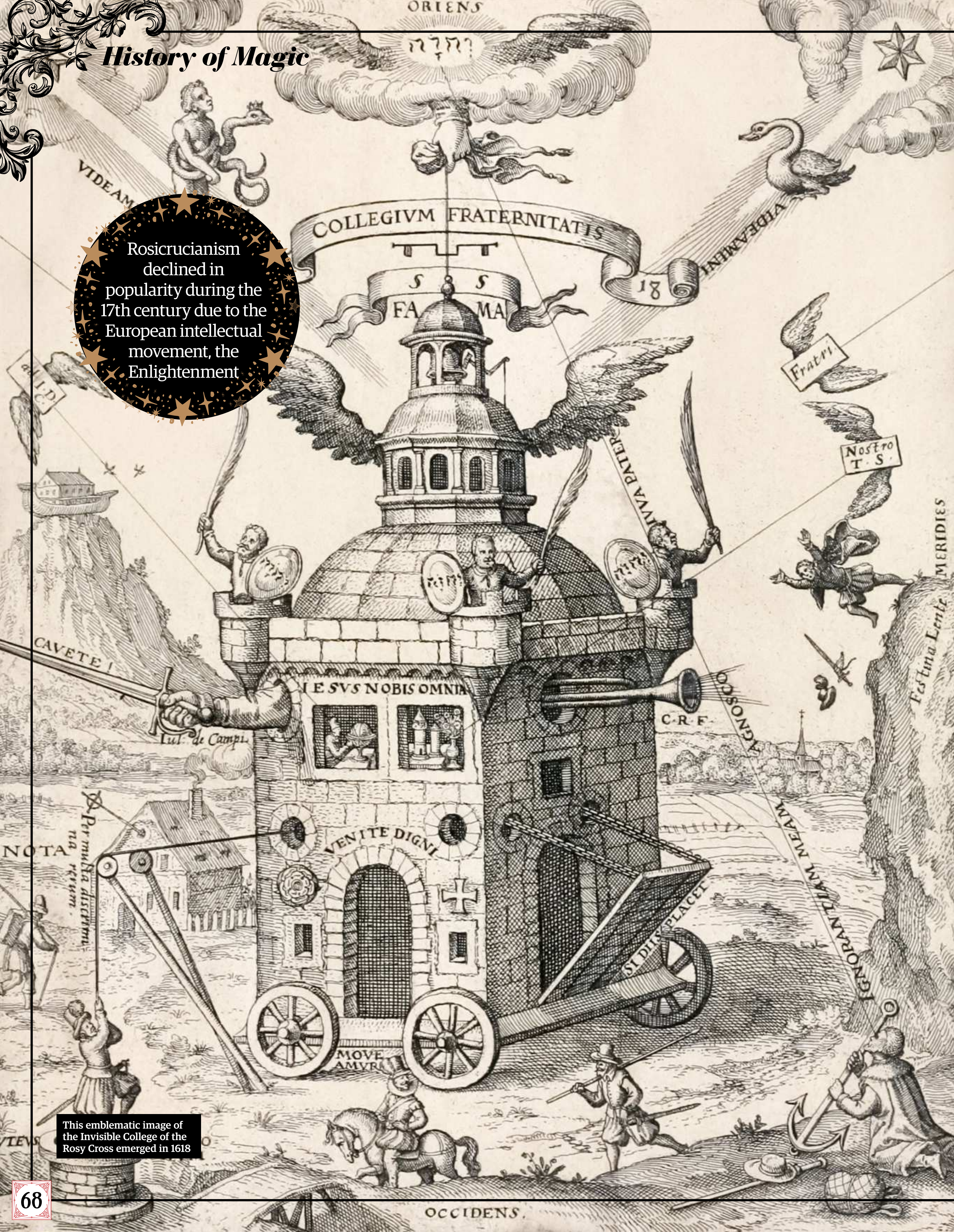
crystal balls



Spheromancy is the most famous method of scrying. Practitioners stare into a crystal ball and wait for visions to appear before them

Gastromancy is another name used for crystal gazing, although this can also refer to predictions based on sounds emanating from the belly, or even through ventriloquism

© Getty Images; Creative Commons; Museu Britânico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VENITE DIGNI
SI DIIS PLACET
IGNORANTIAM MEAM
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Rosicrucianism declined in popularity during the 17th century due to the European intellectual movement, the Enlightenment

This emblematic image of the Invisible College of the Rosy Cross emerged in 1618

Rosicrucianism

When ancient manifestos telling of a secret brotherhood emerged after being 'hidden' for decades, a new spiritual movement began

Written by David Crookes

Europe in the early 17th century was not a happy place. It was a continent marked by religious divisions and political strife which would escalate into the bloody Thirty Years' War that led to eight million lives being lost.

At the same time, it was a period of great change. During the century, modern philosophy and science emerged thanks to impressive thinkers such as Newton and Descartes. But were these men also members of the spiritual movement Rosicrucianism? Some have said so but, alas, we may never know.

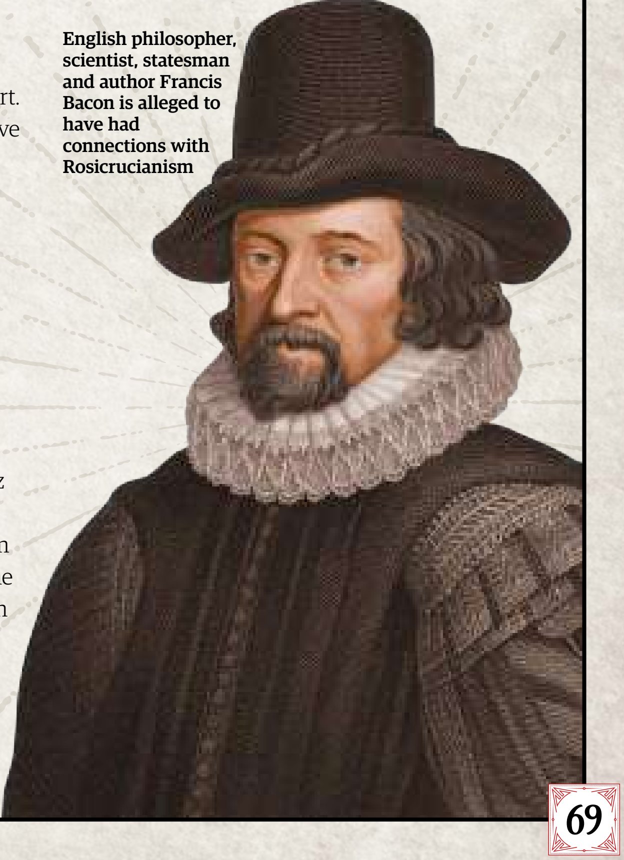
> Key to Rosicrucianism is the belief that followers are party to life-changing secrets that originated in ancient times

There are a great many stories and myths about Rosicrucianism, not least those which surround its origins. What we know to be true, however, is that in 1614 in the Holy Roman Empire state of Hesse-Kassel, located in present-day Germany, the first of two anonymously published manifestos was published that would cause a huge stir – not least because they apparently shed light on a supposed secret brotherhood that no-one had heard of before.

From that point on, you can take much of the origin story with a pinch of salt. For while the first of these manifestos, the *Fama Fraternitatis of the Meritorious Order of the Rosy Cross*, was a revelation to all who read or learned about it, it was heralded as a hoax, a joke or mere allegory, depending on the interpretation, almost from the start. But that's not to say it didn't have many followers or believers, or that it wasn't legitimate. Quite the opposite. It was viewed as another path to enlightenment, and many saw it as a way forward for intellectual, social, religious and political reform.

The *Fama Fraternitatis* told of a poor German doctor and mystic philosopher called Christian Rosenkreuz who, it was claimed, had travelled across Damascus, Egypt and Morocco towards Jerusalem at the turn of the 15th century in a bid to learn the occult secrets of the universe, obtain true wisdom and discover the elixir of life.

Over the course of his journey, Rosenkreuz (or Father Brother C.R.C as he was referred to in the text), was said to have studied under secret Arabian masters of the occult arts, and he is understood to have built up an enviable knowledge of physics, mathematics, magic, and Kabbalah.



English philosopher, scientist, statesman and author Francis Bacon is alleged to have had connections with Rosicrucianism

The tree of knowledge of good and evil, taken from *Figure segrete dei Rosacroce* (Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians), 1785

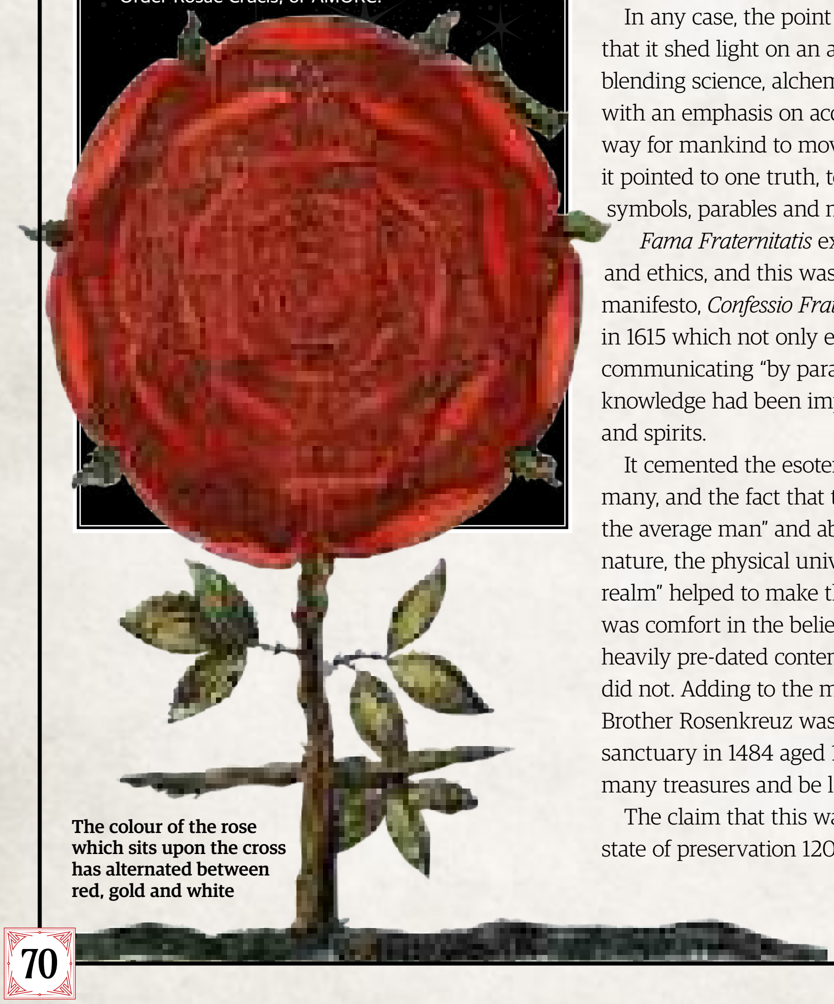
The symbol of the Rose Cross

The Rose Cross, otherwise known as the Rosy Cross, was said to have been created by Christian Rosenkreuz, the founder of Rosicrucianism. But since we know Rosenkreuz to be fictional, we can suppose it was actually the work of whoever produced the manifestos that underpinned the movement.

It takes the Christian symbol of the cross and embeds it with a rose at its centre, and it clearly marries well with Christian Rosenkreuz's name. What it actually symbolises is open to debate, although some posit that the cross represents the human body and the rose the unfolding consciousness of individuals.

The Rose Cross has also come to represent silence and salvation for some, while others see it as symbol of human reproduction being elevated to the spiritual, with the rose being female and the cross male.

Such is its power and attractiveness, it came to be used by more modern groups such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an organisation which was devoted to the study and practice of the occult from 1887 to 1903. It still forms part of the emblems of the Rosicrucian Fellowship and the Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis, or AMORC.



The colour of the rose which sits upon the cross has alternated between red, gold and white

When he returned to Germany in 1407, he felt able and compelled to impart what he had learned, but it was claimed that he was ridiculed by the literati. Instead, he founded the Rosicrucian Order, or Order of the Rose Cross, and initially shared his knowledge with three receptive doctors. Two years later, Rosenkreuz went on to build a sanctuary called the House of the Holy Spirit, where the followers of the Order - who by now numbered eight - would meet every year on the same day.

Each of those men were understood to be good doctors, determined to heal the sick for free. They agreed to wear only the dress of the country they were in, to continue the Order by finding someone worthy to succeed themselves after death, and to ensure that the Fraternity would remain a closely guarded secret for 100 years.

But while it was suggested that Rosenkreuz himself had scribed the words, squirrelling the resulting manuscript away only for it be discovered later, only fundamentalists really took it literally or believed the man actually existed. The rest saw *Fama Fraternitatis* as an allegorical manuscript, although some have also come to believe that the Order of the Rose Cross may have been a disguise for another secret movement.

In any case, the point of Rosicrucianism was that it shed light on an ancient world order, blending science, alchemy, arts and mysticism with an emphasis on acquired knowledge as a way for mankind to move forward. Like Kabbalah, it pointed to one truth, told via the use of various symbols, parables and metaphors.

Fama Fraternitatis explored philosophy, religion and ethics, and this was furthered in the second manifesto, *Confessio Fraternitatis* (*The Confessio*) in 1615 which not only explicitly stated it was communicating "by parables" but said Rosenkreuz's knowledge had been imparted on him by angels and spirits.

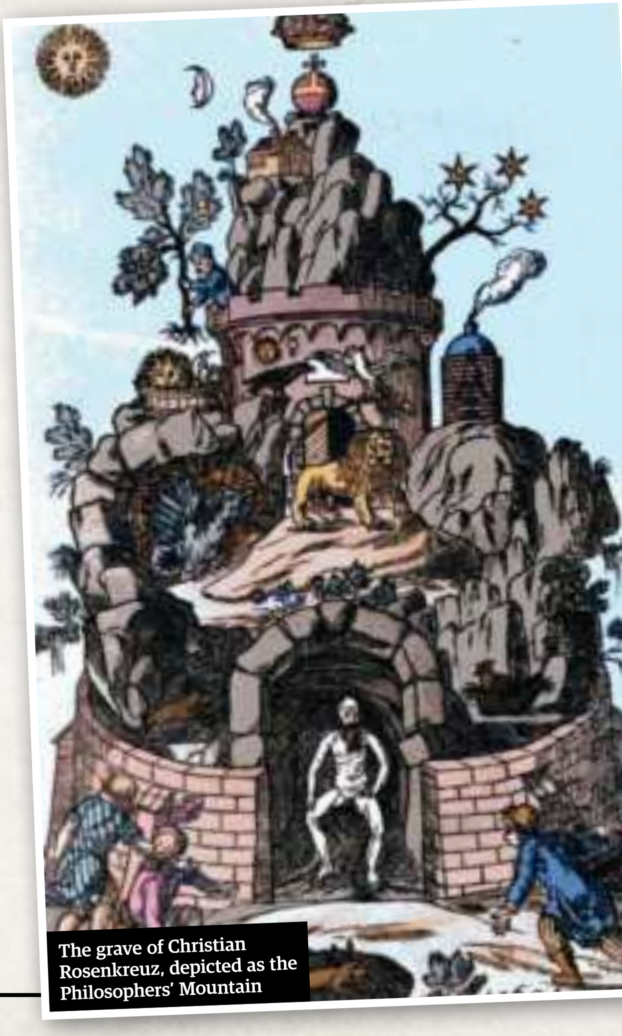
It cemented the esoteric order in the minds of many, and the fact that they were "concealed from the average man" and able to "provide insight into nature, the physical universe and the spiritual realm" helped to make them feel important. There was comfort in the belief that the movement heavily pre-dated contemporary times, even if it did not. Adding to the mystery was the claim that Brother Rosenkreuz was laid to rest in his own sanctuary in 1484 aged 106 - a vault said to contain many treasures and be lit by an inner sun.

The claim that this was found in a perfect state of preservation 120 years later in 1604 was merely a signal for general reformation, according to Dame Frances Yates, author of *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*. She says the opening of the vault symbolised the opening of a door in Europe and it was to lead to a new age of understanding. This displayed parallels with Christianity.

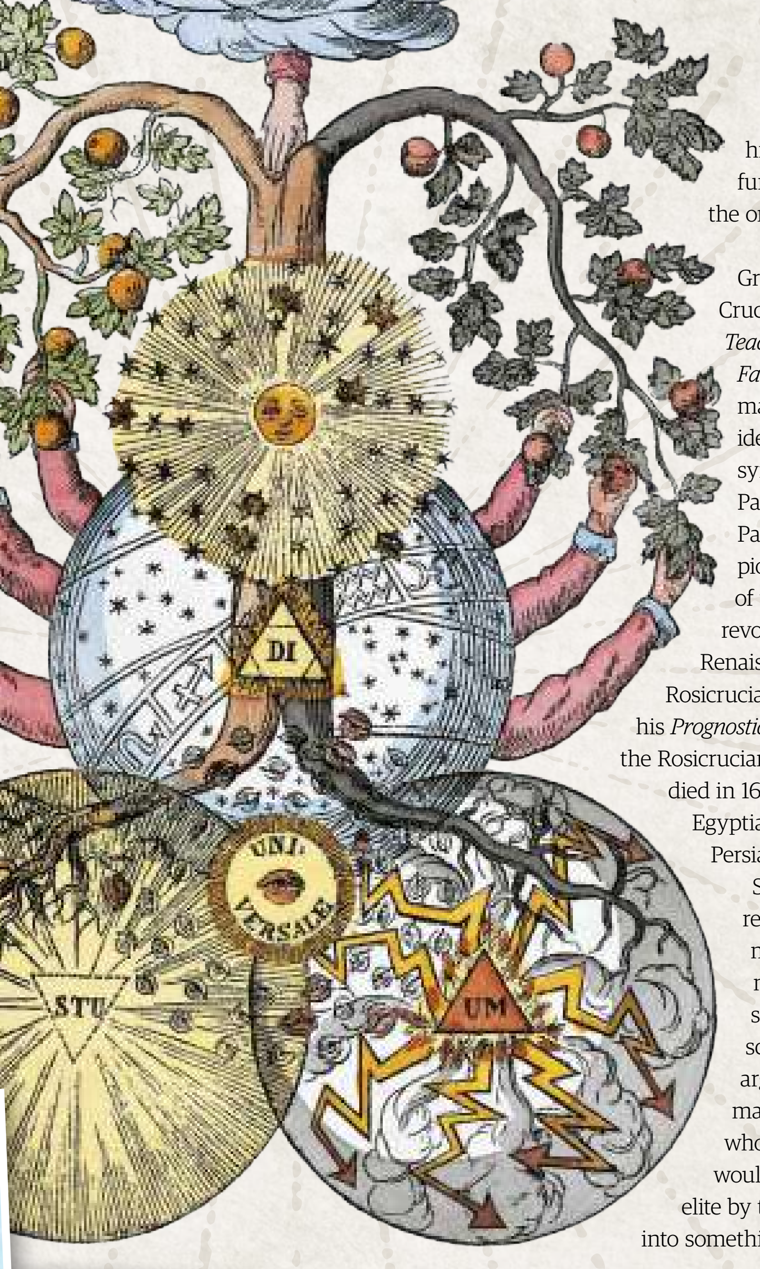
> Johann Valentin Andreae, who wrote *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz*, said Rosicrucianism was an object of fun

Indeed, the Lutheran theologian Johann Valentin Andreae is said to have written the manifestos himself, although that is disputed and will perhaps never be resolved.

Andreae did write an odd alchemical romance called *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz* in 1616, however, and it too proved very influential. Again, there were references of sorts to Christianity, not least in the division of the story into Seven Days, much like Genesis. There is also a nod to the Father of Lights - a phrase that appears in the Book of James in the King James Bible along with nine Lords - and it is no coincidence there are nine books in the New Testament. So while Andreae said



The grave of Christian Rosenkreuz, depicted as the Philosophers' Mountain



his work was "ludibrium" (an object of fun), the parts that contained hints to the origins of Rosicrucianism were clear.

Reuben Clymer, a former Supreme Grand Master of the Fraternitas Rosae Crucis and author of *The Rosy Cross: Its Teachings*, published in 1965, said the *Fama Fraternitatis* also combined many concepts and esoteric ideas, drawing upon symbolism and Paracelsian principles. Paracelsus pioneered aspects of the medical revolution of the Renaissance, and Rosicrucians would study his *Prognostications*. Meanwhile, the Rosicrucian Michael Maier, who died in 1622, said: "Our origins are Egyptian and Samothrace, the Magi of Persia, the Pythagoreans and the Arabs."

Such deep inspiration and a revelatory world view won the movement many followers, and they numbered some high-profile thinkers such as the English philosopher and scientist Francis Bacon (who some argue may also have been behind the manifestos of 1614 and 1615). Anyone who took the teachings on board would feel special and part of a select elite by the fact that they were hooking into something deemed revelatory. There is an attraction in believing the Rosicrucians are operating invisibly and have the secret and power to put things right.

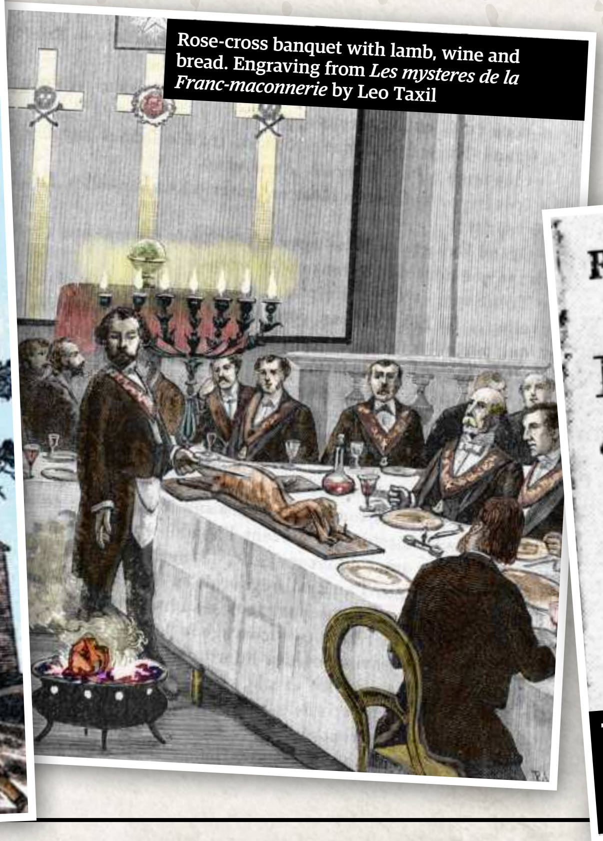
This concept is what is said to have led to the formation of the Invisible College which became a precursor group to the Royal Society of London. Rosicrucian principles steered people towards a utopian world populated by enlightened people spreading good and sharing knowledge of the arts and natural science. The Invisible College followed the teaching that knowledge can be disseminated among learned men gathering in groups.

Freemasonry was said to be an outgrowth of Rosicrucianism. Indeed, the English essayist Thomas De Quincey believed the movement influenced Freemasonry when it arrived in England. Prominent Rosicrucian Elias Ashmole joined the Freemasonry on 16 October 1646 and, in 1750, there was a reference to English Freemasons having copied some Rosicrucian ceremonies.

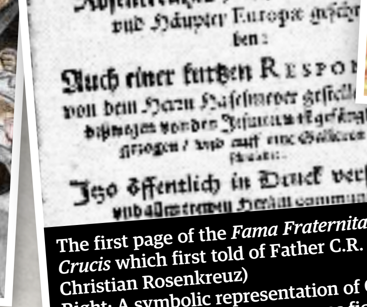
What this points to, however, is Rosicrucianism leading to secret societies rather than starting out as one. For while the story of Rosenkreuz makes claims of a brotherhood that met behind closed doors and remained hidden from society, it is more likely that Rosicrucianism formed in the early 17th century and that it did so very much out in the open, given that published work of that nature was difficult to keep under wraps.

> Maier's *Silentium Post Clamores* claimed Rosicrucianism to be drawn from an eternal philosophy underlying all religions

> "Rosicrucianism shed light on an ancient world order, blending science, arts and mysticism"



Rose-cross banquet with lamb, wine and bread. Engraving from *Les mysteres de la Franc-maconnerie* by Leo Taxil



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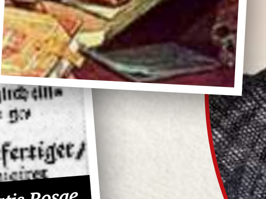
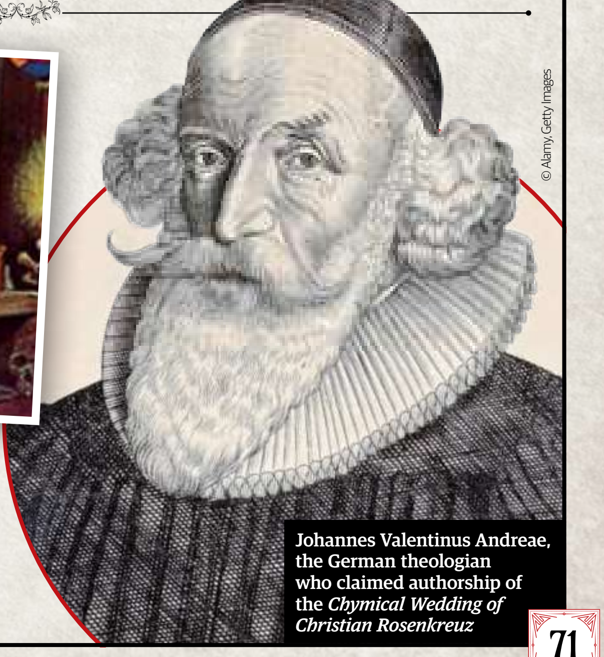


The first page of the *Fama Fraternitatis Rosae Crucis* which first told of Father C.R. (aka Christian Rosenkreuz)
Right: A symbolic representation of Christian Rosenkreuz, who most agree was fictional



Johannes Valentinus Andreae, the German theologian who claimed authorship of the *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz*

© Alamy, Getty Images

Tarot

From the Chariot and the Hanged Man to Death, the Tower and the Devil, can you really play your cards right with the tarot?

Written by Poppy-Jay Palmer

The origins of tarot cards were quite innocent: they first became popular as playing cards in the 15th century, designed to play games like Italian tarocchini and French tarot. It wasn't until the late 18th century that they earned their current reputation, their link to the occult, when they started being used for the art of divination, specifically in the newly popular forms of tarotology and cartomancy.

Through interpreting the illustrations on tarot cards, many people believe that tarot diviners, commonly known as 'readers', can gain insight into the past, present and future. There are several theories behind the workings of using the cards to tell fortunes. Some believe the results to the questions posted by the reader are guided by a spiritual force. Others believe the cards have the power to tap into the human collective unconscious, or into the depths of the subject's own creative unconscious.

Those interested in occult activities saw the tarot as something exciting and revolutionary. Those that feared it saw it as an instrument for the devil. Tarot divination became popular among occultists when the French started to develop the idea that the cards carried mystical properties. In 1781, Antoine Court de Gébelin published a dissertation on the idea that the tarot design was based on ancient Egyptian religious texts featuring the likes of Isis, Osiris and Typhon, and therefore carried deep divine significance. Since Court de Gébelin's dissertation, historians have discovered that none of his ideas regarding the links between ancient Egypt and the tarot were true.

French occultist Etteilla, the pseudonym of Jean-Baptiste Alliette, became the first to assign divinatory meaning to the cards with the Tarot of Marseilles deck (different kinds of decks were available in different regions), which contained themes relating to ancient Egypt. In 1783, he devised a proper method of tarot divination, created the first Egyptian tarot to be used exclusively for tarot cartomancy, and formed the first occultist tarot society for enthusiasts.

Taking inspiration from Etteilla's work, Marie Anne Lenormand became the first bona fide tarot reader for people in high places, including Empress Josephine and Napoleon, and quickly shot to fame within the community. As tarot cards became more popular and spread from France to other countries and cultures, the system was being updated constantly. Disputes regarding certain cards' meanings are even continuing to this day. Nowadays, there are possibly fewer readers around than when tarot cards first took off, but you still don't have to look too far to find one.

> Tarot cards first arrived in Europe in the bags of Islamic soldiers as they invaded Italy, Sicily and Spain in the 16th century

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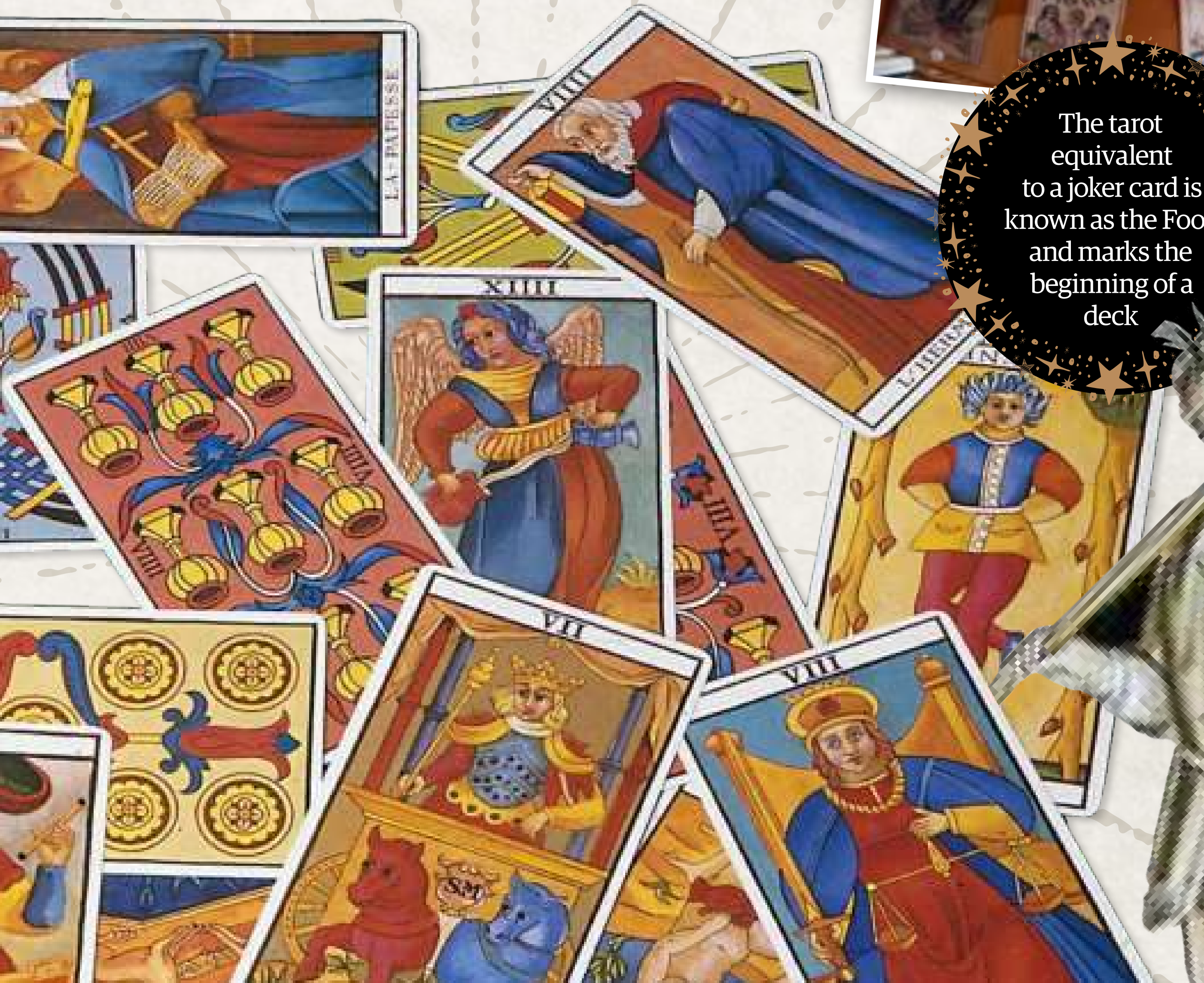
> "Many people believe that tarot diviners, commonly known as 'readers', can gain insight into the past, present and future"

Many French occultists believed that tarot cards originated from ancient Egyptian theology

The tarot equivalent to a joker card is known as the Fool, and marks the beginning of a deck



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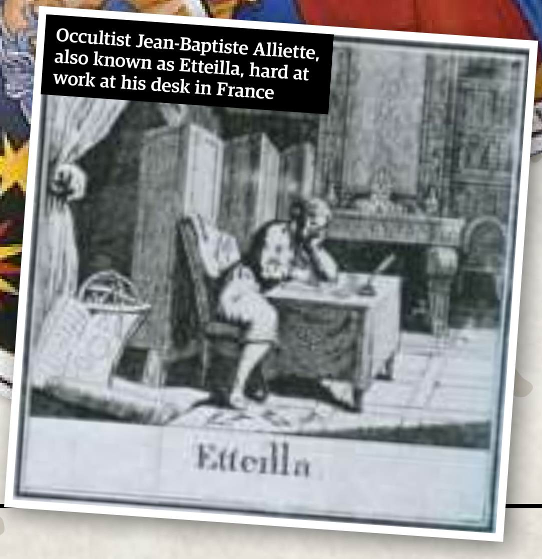
Interpretations of the meaning of individual tarot cards are still disputed to this day



Occultist Jean-Baptiste Alliette, also known as Etteilla, hard at work at his desk in France

© Getty Images, Creative Commons, Sai Oiko

Magic in the Age of Enlightenment

Enlightenment was not the triumph of rationality over religion and superstition

Written by Derek Wilson

Not until 1865 did the word 'Enlightenment' come into being to describe certain 18th-century philosophical developments. Moreover, it was originally a term of disapprobation, implying 'shallow and pretentious intellectualism'. The relationship between religion, occultism and science was much more complex than the supposed banishing of all other forms of traditional knowledge and belief by empiricism (i.e. what can be proved by observation and calculation). For example, Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), the greatest scientific genius before Einstein, wrote more extensively about the Second Coming of Christ than he did about gravity, and Robert Boyle (1629-1691), the 'father of modern chemistry', left money in his will for 'annual lectures to be delivered for the defence of Christianity against atheism and other "errors".' We also need to bear in mind that the major intellectual developments of the period from the early 17th to the late 18th centuries were the result not only of remarkably gifted thinkers, but also of major politico-religious movements in what was a very troubled period of European history. That period began with the Thirty Years' War on the Continent and the Civil War in Britain. It included religious revival movements on both sides of the Atlantic. It ended with the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars.

> Most scholars identify Newton as an Antitrinitarian monotheist - he rejected the doctrine of the Trinity

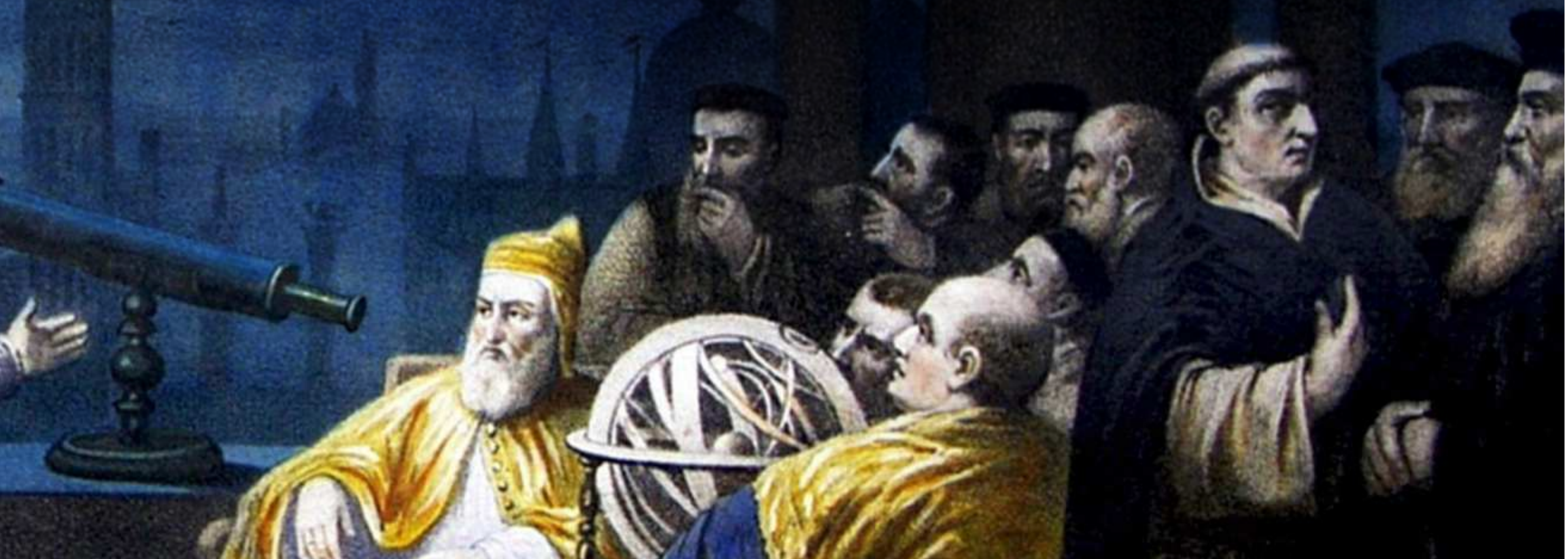
Let us begin in 1633 with the incident often represented as the beginning of the clash between religion and science, the papal condemnation of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). The Italian astronomer had long since embraced Copernicus' heliocentric theory - that the Earth moves around the Sun. Copernicus had demonstrated this mathematically, but Galileo had confirmed it by means of observations using his newly developed telescope. Traditionalists rejected heliocentrism because they were wedded to the long-established physics laid down by the 4th century BCE philosopher Aristotle, and because various Bible references described the movements of heavenly bodies as they appeared from Earth. We still think of the Sun as 'rising' in the East and 'setting' in the West, even though we know that it is actually our planet that moves. To most of our 17th century ancestors it was perfectly obvious that the Sun did the moving. As for Copernicus' apparent contradiction of the Bible, Galileo agreed with a prominent cardinal who observed that 'the Bible teaches us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go'.

All this would have remained within the realm of scholarly debate had not the pope come down firmly on the side of the traditionalists. He threw the weight of the Church behind the Aristotelian view. What was at stake, therefore, was not a theory of astrophysics, but the authority of the pope. For over 100 years the Catholic church had been under siege from Protestants and other heretics who challenged various aspects of belief and practice. In response, Rome became steadily more obdurate, buttressing its understanding of truth with the threat of condemnation and punishment by the Inquisition. Under these circumstances many church officials who might otherwise have been ready to give Galileo a hearing fell into line with the official Roman verdict. Some of them even refused to look through Galileo's telescope, believing that it must be some kind of magic device designed to seduce them from the truth.

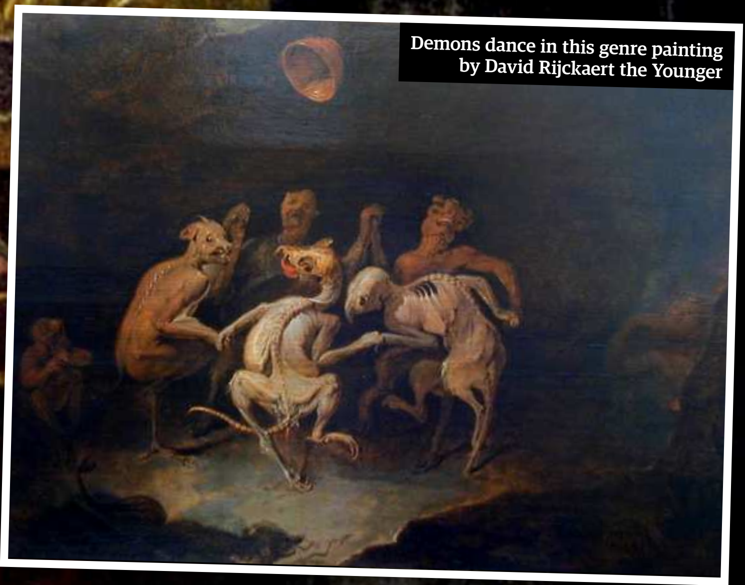
Then, in 1623, Galileo had what seemed to be a stroke of luck. One of his own friends became pope as Urban VIII. He studied Galileo's arguments and instructed him to write a book describing the scholarly debate. The pope made two stipulations: Galileo was only to present heliocentrism as a possible theory. He was also to ensure that Urban's own position was clearly represented. Galileo, therefore, wrote *A Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*. As the title suggests, the subject was presented as a discussion between a wise Copernican, 'Salviati', and a stupid, obscurantist Aristotelian, 'Simplicio'. It was through the mouth of Simplicio that the author presented Urban's arguments. The pope was furious. He summoned the old man (now in his 70s) back to Rome to face a charge of disobedience. He was found guilty, though three of his judges refused to sign the indictment. He was obliged to confess publicly that he believed everything taught by holy church. He was sentenced to perpetual imprisonment (which would likely have killed him off quickly) but this was commuted to house arrest in his own home.

About the time that Galileo was clashing with ecclesiastical authority in Italy, on the other side of the Alps a conflict of altogether more terrifying and wide-ranging proportions was taking place. Between about 1626 and 1631, parts of Germany were in the grip of witch mania. Sporadic outbreaks of persecution were not uncommon in both Catholic and Protestant territories. An earlier one in Bonn was describe by a contemporary in these words:

"There must be half the city implicated for already professors, law students, pastors, canons, vicars and monks have been arrested and burned. ... The chancellor and his wife and the private secretary's wife are already executed. ... Students and boys of noble birth of nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen



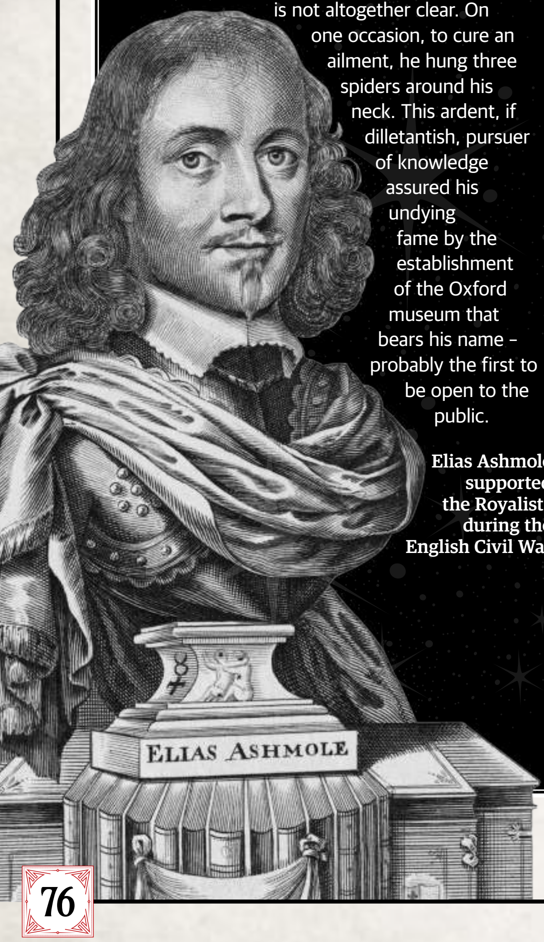
Galileo shows his telescope to the Doge Leonardo Donato



Demons dance in this genre painting by David Rijckaert the Younger

Elias Ashmole

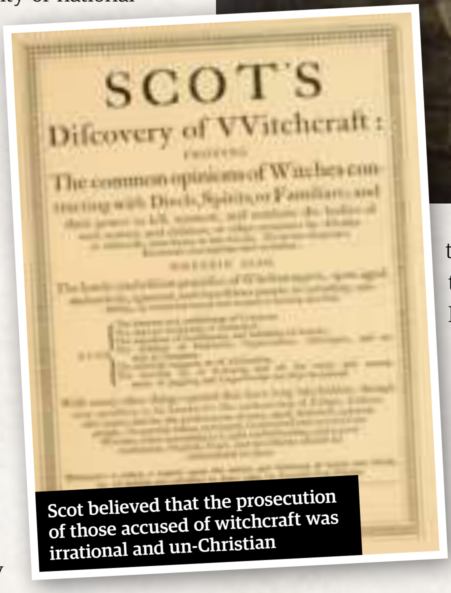
Elias Ashmole (1617-1692) was an example of the educated Englishman whose tastes were catholic and who cannot, therefore, be pigeon-holed as a friend or enemy of the occult. There were many such. He went to London in 1633, became a solicitor and applied himself assiduously to building a fortune by cultivating the right people. He supported Charles I during the Civil War and joined the royal court in Oxford. There he took the opportunity to extend his education and his wide-ranging studies embraced mathematics, physics, astrology, alchemy and magic. Ashmole was a staunch Church of England man who held all nonconformists in contempt, but he became a Freemason in 1646 and he probably also flirted with Rosicrucianism. When designing his coat of arms he surmounted the shield with an image of the god Mercury supported by figures representing the twin constellation Gemini. His chosen motto, 'Ex Uno Omnia' (All comes from the One), indicated his fascination with the Hermetic tradition. Court favour and financially advantageous marriages enabled him to amass a huge collection of books, prints, coins, medals and curios that he bestowed on the University of Oxford, which, in 1669, awarded him a doctorate in Medicine. How far his own knowledge merited this accolade is not altogether clear. On one occasion, to cure an ailment, he hung three spiders around his neck. This ardent, if dilettantish, pursuer of knowledge assured his undying fame by the establishment of the Oxford museum that bears his name – probably the first to be open to the public.



Elias Ashmole supported the Royalists during the English Civil War

fourteen years have been burned. In fine, things are in such a pitiful state that one does not know with what people one may talk and associate."

Witch mania is an example of a historical phenomenon that repeats itself over and again in all societies. We might call it the 'them' prejudice. People suffering misfortune frequently look for a scapegoat; the problem is the fault of 'them'. 'Them' may be the Jews, the government, the communists, the EU, foreign immigrants – whoever happens to be the current focus of community or national hatred. In the confusion and terror engendered by the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), hundreds of towns and cities were destroyed. Farmland was trampled by foraging armies. Millions died from disease and starvation as well as military combat. Germany lost a quarter of its population. With such manifest evils stalking the land it is not altogether surprising that sufferers looked for scapegoats and sought to purge their communities of them.


SCOT'S
Difcovery of VVitchcraft :

Scot believed that the prosecution of those accused of witchcraft was irrational and un-Christian

Folklore provided lurid descriptions of black magicians and their activities. It was widely believed that Satan summoned witches and wizards to attend 'sabbats', where blasphemous travesties of Christian worship were enacted and sacrifices were offered. Those called to such assemblies flew through the air to be present. None of this had any part in Christian doctrine but, since the Bible endorsed belief in spiritual conflict between the powers of good and evil, little, if anything, was done by church authorities to challenge such stories. Among the intelligentsia, opinions were divided. Some men of science, such as Robert Boyle, accepted the common conviction that witches existed and were in league with the devil. But there was a growing scepticism, not only about the more bizarre accounts of occult activity, but also about the very existence of witchcraft. Samuel Harsnett (1561-1631), a cleric who eventually rose to be Archbishop of York, wrote a treatise condemning clergy who carried out exorcisms. He gave it as his opinion that people who "have their brains baited and their fancies distempered with the imaginations and apprehensions of Witches, Conjurors, and Fairies, and all that Lymphatical Chimera, I find

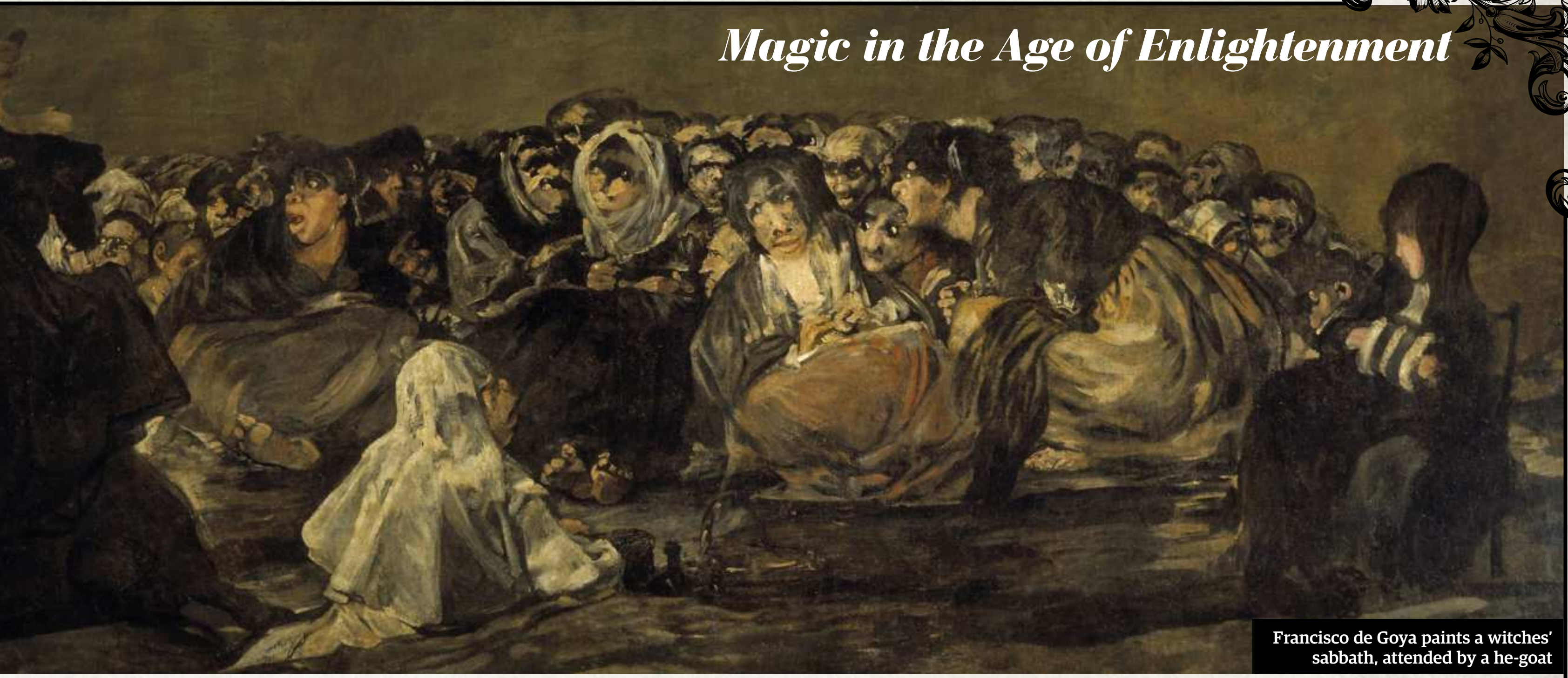
Matthew Hopkins, the Witchfinder General, may have been responsible for the deaths of hundreds of women

to be marshalled in one of these five ranks: Children, Fools, Women, Cowards, sick or black melancholic discomposed wits."

Other critics, while debunking the more lurid accounts of occult activity, were cautious about declaring that witchcraft did not actually exist. Not only were they anxious to avoid being tarred as heretics, they also did not want to be seen as at odds with the law, for most European states had anti-witchcraft legislation in place.

Then again, the prevailing philosophical framework in which post-Renaissance debate took place made it difficult for radical thinkers to deny the possibility of magic. Neo-Platonic metaphysics taught the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual realms and sought ways of harnessing the powers latent in the cosmos. It took the better part of two centuries for a new rationale regarding the occult to become firmly established among the leaders of society and to bring all witchcraft prosecutions to an end.

The laying of a new philosophical ground plan was undertaken by thinkers trying to arrive at a logically acceptable concept of God in a Europe where Catholics and Protestants were zealously slaughtering each other. As early as 1584, a down-to-earth Kentish gentleman called Reginald Scot had debunked the whole idea of malevolent magical powers on religious grounds. In his *Discoverie of Witchcraft* he argued that an



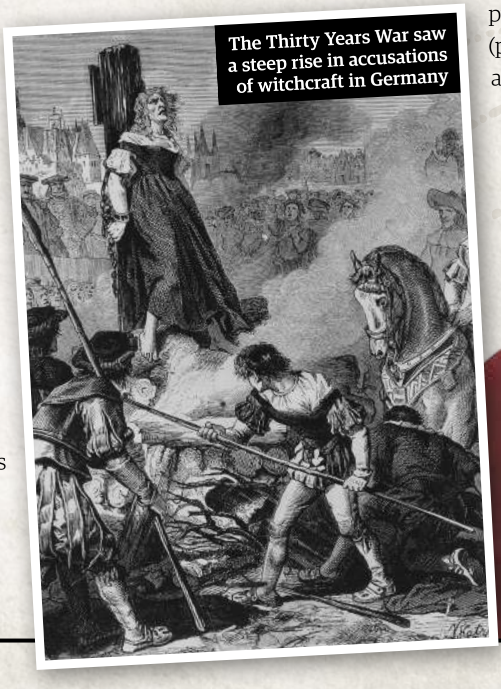
Francisco de Goya paints a witches' sabbath, attended by a he-goat

all-powerful God would not allow any human agent to exercise spiritual powers. Witches, Scot claimed, belonged to one of four categories. Some were innocent victims of malevolent neighbours, some were self-deluded, some were deliberate fraudsters, making money from phoney charms and potions. The rest were genuine - that is, they sought to inflict harm by supernatural means, but any success they achieved was attributable to chance or to sinister means, such as poison or what we would now call auto-suggestion. Scot's scepticism gradually gained ground among thinking people. What is surprising, from a modern viewpoint, is that it took so long.

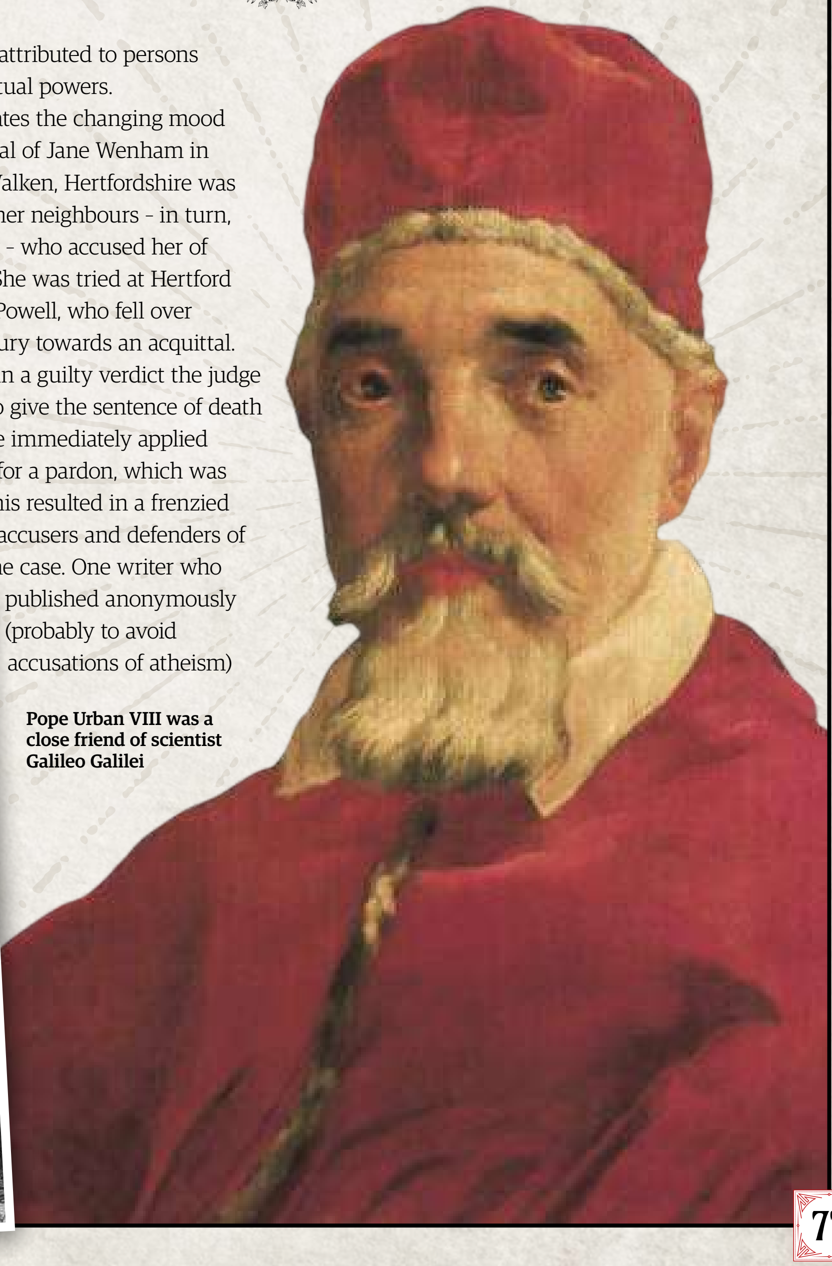
In the 17th century a new brand of philosophers emerged who applied their own kind of solvents to the common belief in black magic. Men like René Descartes (1596-1650), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) were all pondering the existence and nature of God and coming to very different conclusions. The common ground they shared was a 'mechanistic' concept of the universe. However it came into being, it operated according to strict rules. Those rules were informative about the one who devised them (if, indeed, such a being existed). One by-product of this understanding of the cosmos was that it could not be changed from within - that is to say that no human being could manipulate it, perform miracles or cast effective spells. In other words, there are no such things as witches or wizards or cunning men or whatever fanciful name might be claimed by or attributed to persons thought to possess spiritual powers.

> "There was a growing scepticism... about the very existence of witchcraft"

Nothing better illustrates the changing mood of the times than the trial of Jane Wenham in 1712. Jane, a widow of Walken, Hertfordshire was denounced by some of her neighbours - in turn, egged on by local clergy - who accused her of various malicious acts. She was tried at Hertford Assizes before Sir John Powell, who fell over backwards to steer the jury towards an acquittal. When the jury brought in a guilty verdict the judge had no alternative but to give the sentence of death by hanging. However, he immediately applied to the Crown in person for a pardon, which was immediately granted. This resulted in a frenzied pamphlet war between accusers and defenders of the clergy involved in the case. One writer who published anonymously (probably to avoid accusations of atheism)



The Thirty Years War saw a steep rise in accusations of witchcraft in Germany



Pope Urban VIII was a close friend of scientist Galileo Galilei pointed out that human beings were able to change the 'rules' governing nature, but certainly not by invoking demons.

"Not only our witchcrafts have been banished, but all arts and sciences have been greatly improved. Our buildings are much more beautiful and commodious and yet more cheaply built and easier kept in repair. Our gardens and orchards are stocked with new and nobler fruits and fields and woods with useful trees. Many of our lands that were almost useless are loaded with new kinds of grass and roots, by better understanding the improvement of the soil … Physic and surgery are new moulded and improved, for the lengthening out of life in ease … The farthest planets are brought near and their motions wonderfully accounted for … All arts are improved, God is seen and admired in his works, and the honour of religion no ways lessened."

(A Letter from a Physician in Hertfordshire to his Friend in London)

That vision of a utopian world might not have convinced everyone who read it, but it did make the point that humanity could abandon magic without abandoning God. England was one of the first nations to put an end to witchcraft trials. Though unofficial lynchings did sometimes occur, the last legal conviction took place in 1716. It would be another 66 years before the last European state (Switzerland) abandoned witchcraft prosecutions.

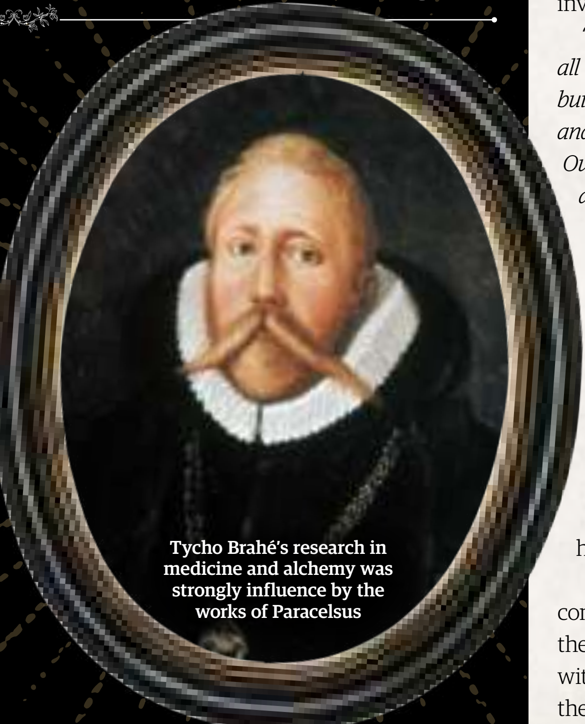
The author of 'A Letter from a Physician' cited the diffusion of scientific knowledge as a fundamental reason for the overcoming of superstition and the greater wellbeing of society. There was much truth in this assertion. One of the hidden revolutions that took place in the second half of the 17th century was that education became fashionable. Between the end of the Thirty Years' War and the beginning of the Napoleonic Wars, Europe enjoyed a century and a half of relative peace. This enabled the more affluent members of society to concentrate on acquiring the arts of civilised living. This was the age of the Grand Tour. The scions of wealthy English families were despatched to the Continent for three years or so to learn foreign languages, discover foreign cultures and study with some of the leading intellectuals of the age. The more inquisitive and acquisitive travellers returned with cartloads (sometimes shiploads) of souvenirs - paintings, sculptures, books, various scientific specimens - with which to adorn their mansions and impress their friends.

A parallel development was the foundation of academies where gentlemen of leisure met to discuss all aspects of science and the arts. In 1635 the Parisian Academy was established and, in 1666, this developed into the French Academy of Sciences. In 1662 the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge came into being

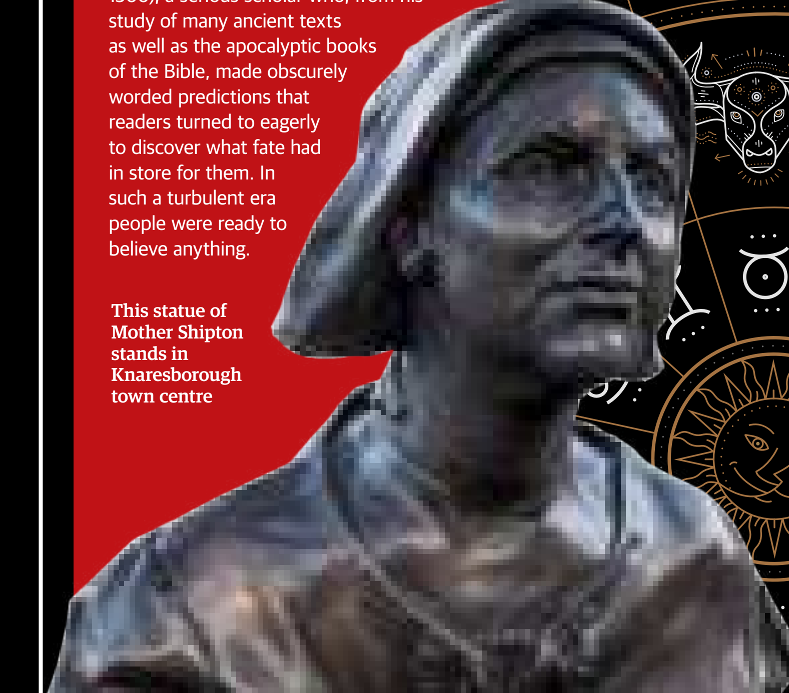
"People were ready to believe anything"

Horoscopes

Having a horoscope prepared by an astrologer was a luxury that only the wealthy could afford – until the spread of printed periodicals. Canny publishers realised that a huge market existed among people who wanted predictions about their future or advice on the most propitious time to undertake a venture. They began to produce almanacs and it is calculated that, by 1650, over 400,000 of these cheap handbooks were being sold annually in England. Almanacs provided a variety of information, from important dates to medical advice; from astronomical details to predictions. They varied in quality. Some were produced by leading astronomers/astrologers, such as the Danish scholar Tycho Brahe. Others were catchpenny, sensationalist offerings deliberately exploiting the gullible. It was almanacs that now made popular the predictions of ancient soothsayers. The legendary prophecies of Merlin, written in the 12th century by Geoffrey of Monmouth, were retold and made to apply to current or imminent events, as were the sayings of Mother Shipton, a 16th century Yorkshire soothsayer. The most famous seer was the French physician and astrologer, Nostradamus (1503-1566), a serious scholar who, from his study of many ancient texts as well as the apocalyptic books of the Bible, made obscurely worded predictions that readers turned to eagerly to discover what fate had in store for them. In such a turbulent era people were ready to believe anything.



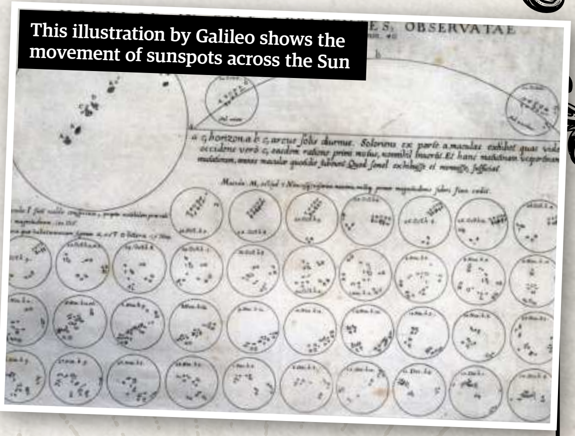
Tycho Brahé's research in medicine and alchemy was strongly influence by the works of Paracelsus



This statue of Mother Shipton stands in Knaresborough town centre

Wolsey
Shipton

TAURUS
ARIES
AGITTARIUS



This illustration by Galileo shows the movement of sunspots across the Sun

Galileo's telescope, c.1610

and, as the name indicates, it enjoyed active royal patronage from the new king, Charles II. Similar learned bodies were set up in Berlin and other European centres. Here members delivered lectures, debated and performed experiments. They wrote reports of their proceedings, which were circulated to other members of this intellectual elite throughout Europe.

But such societies did not only exist in major cities. Leaders of rural society who liked to think of themselves as cultured set up regional debating societies. For example, in 1710 certain Lincolnshire gentlemen and clergy established The Society of Gentlemen for the Supporting of Mutual Benevolence and Their Improvement in the Liberal Sciences and in Polite Learning. Among those invited to address its meetings were Sir Isaac Newton, Sir Hans Sloane (the president of the Royal Society, whose collection later formed the nucleus of the British Museum), the Rev William Stukeley (an antiquarian and celebrated archaeological pioneer of both the Stonehenge and Avebury excavations), and the poets Alexander Pope and John Gay. Also significant is the fact that among the Spalding Society's founder members was the Rector of Epworth, one Samuel Wesley, father of John and Charles Wesley, the founders of the Methodist movement.

> The Royal Society's motto 'Nullius in verba' is taken to mean 'take nobody's word for it'

We now associate the Wesley brothers with the religious revival of the mid-18th century (together with its sister movement, the 'Great Awakening' led by George Whitefield in North America), but this does not mean that they were ignorant of or antipathetic to advances in science. On the contrary; John Wesley avidly read the writings of Robert Boyle, John Locke and Sir Isaac Newton. Of Newton he wrote that the great man "carried the lamp of knowledge into paths … that had been unexplored before."

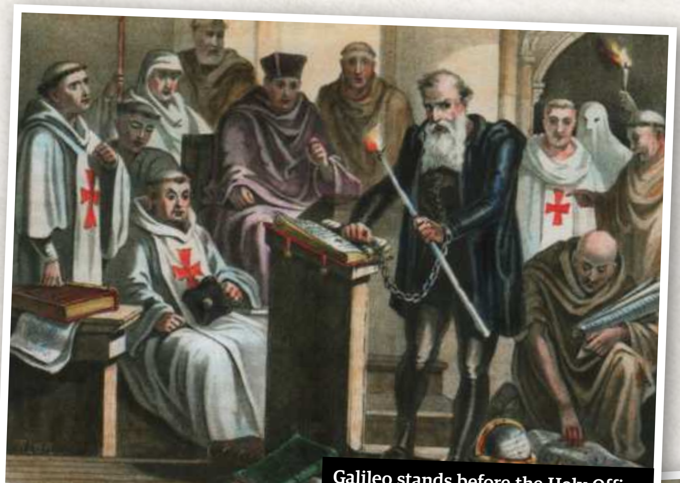
Just as for Wesley there was no gulf between religion and science, so for Newton, who was President of the Royal Society from 1703 to 1727, there was no divide between science, religion and occultism. For this polymath, all aspects of the unknown were ripe for investigation. He devoted years to the study of alchemy. Among his voluminous unpublished papers there appear more than 50,000 words on the manufacture of the philosopher's stone, supposedly able to turn base metals into gold. But his investigations went beyond the study of transmutation. He was concerned to know how chemical substances were formed and what they were made of (what we would now call their molecular structure). In pursuit of such knowledge he did not hesitate to communicate with clandestine, pseudo-magical communities frowned upon by the rest of the scientific fraternity. Newton's knowledge of the Bible was prodigious and his approach to theology was just as individualistic as his reflections on 'pure' science. For instance, he abandoned an early resolve to seek ordination because he discovered that he could no longer believe in the Trinity.

Social and political developments in the 18th century were fundamental to changes of attitude regarding the occult. The widening educational gap between upper and lower classes meant that working people in rural communities tended to cling longer to traditional beliefs. This explains, for example, why learned judges and doctors found themselves at odds with the stubborn witch beliefs of simple villagers. But the beginnings of industrialisation changed the demographic of many areas. People were drawn to the cities in search of work and left behind their rural communities and the folklore that lurked therein. This is an underlying reason for the gradual fading of occult beliefs among the lower orders of society.

At the same time, philosophers and their wealthy patrons were directing their thinking away from speculation about the supernatural and towards the solving of political problems. King Louis XV of France (1710-1774) is credited with the prophetic utterance, 'Aprés moi le deluge'. The old order, headed by absolute monarchs like himself, was under threat from revolutionary forces - and from philosophers who challenged the political principles upon which the concept of a semi-divine hereditary monarchy rested.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1632-1704), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) were among the leading thinkers who explored the concept of the 'social contract' and the issue of political power. Was it top-down, invested by God in chosen leaders - monarchs and aristocrats - or bottom-up, residing in the people, who had the right to choose their own governors? Radical thinking gave some sort of rationale to revolutionary activists.

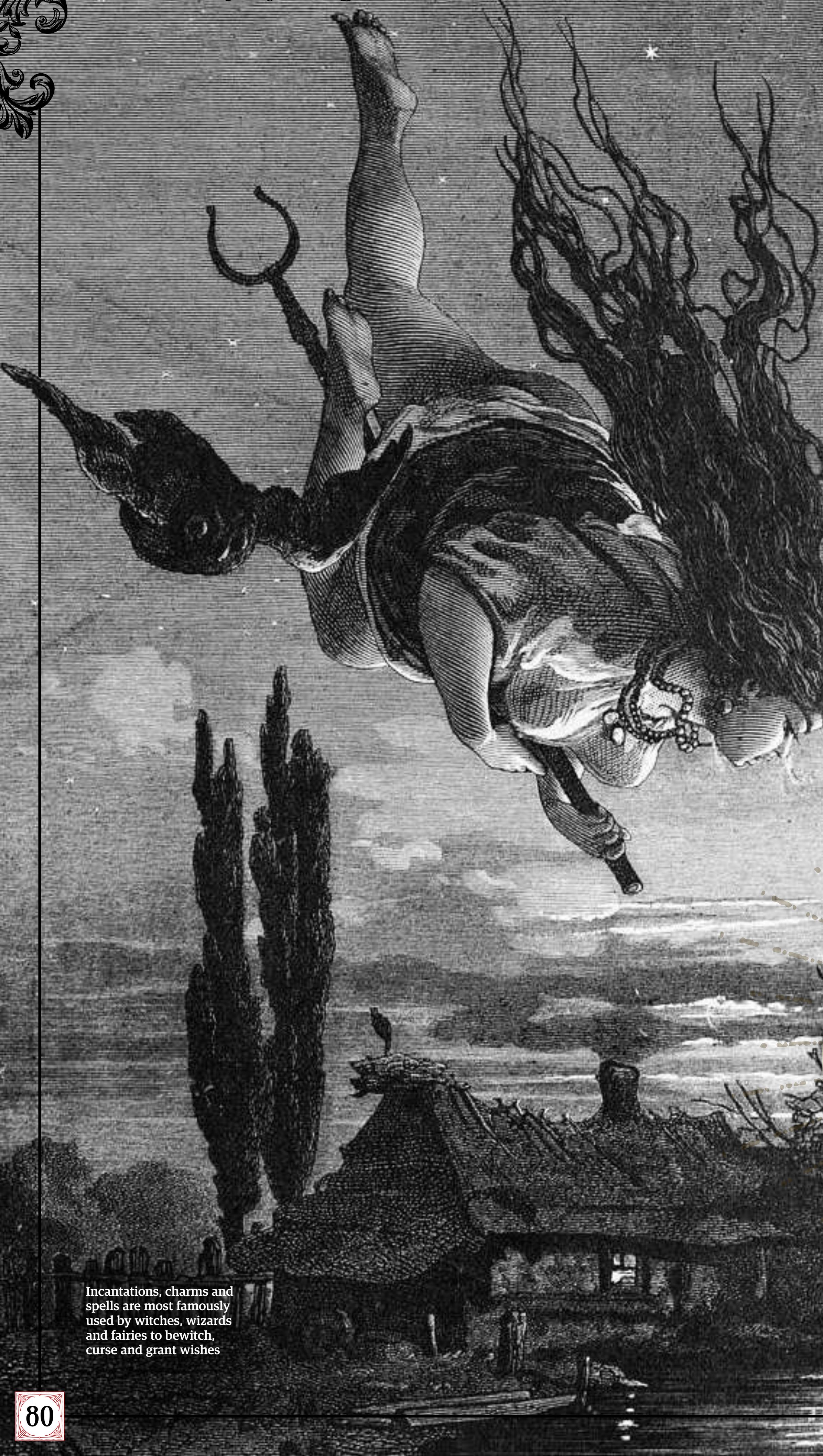
In 1776 American colonists severed ties with Britain. In 1789 the French Revolution broke out, King Louis XVI was executed, France became a republic and found itself at war with the other major European powers. The decades of comparative peace were over. The Continent - and, indeed, the world - was entering an entirely new era of warfare. There would be new battles to be fought on the ground and new arguments to be aired in the sanctums of the philosophers.



Galileo stands before the Holy Office

The Battle of Breitenfeld (1631) was the Protestants' first major victory of the Thirty Years War

© Alamy, Getty Images



Incantations, charms and spells are most famously used by witches, wizards and fairies to bewitch, curse and grant wishes

In the Middle East, incantation bowls of late antiquity were buried upturned, with spiralling incantations inscribed inside to capture demons, as a form of protective magic

Magical words, devilish curses

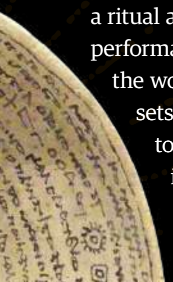
Written by Dee Dee Chainey

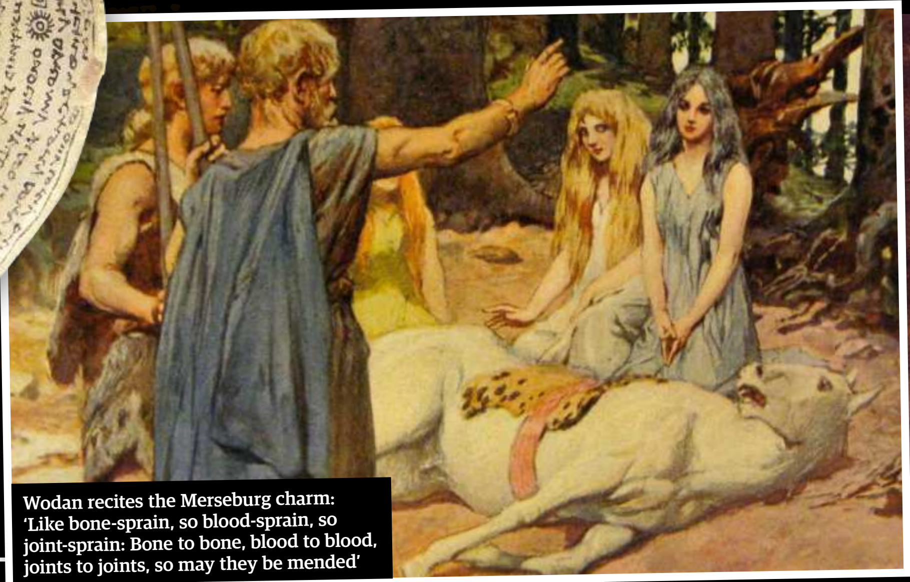
Many people believe in the inherent ability of words to influence the world around us, yet not just any words do this: incantations are magical formulae, said with a specific tone and rhyme. The word 'incantation' comes from the Latin incantare, meaning 'to chant or bewitch', also the origin of the word enchant. They usually appear in a specific context that denotes their sacred and magical nature, often as part of a ritual or ceremony. They are spoken verses, songs or chants, used to make the intent of the speaker have a tangible, magical effect in the world - be it on an object, or even a person.

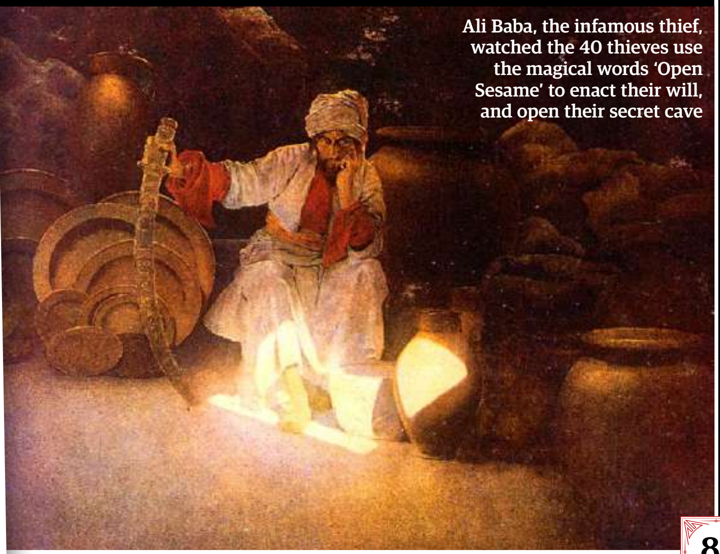
The uttering of the words themselves are a ritual act, and sometimes seen as sacred performance in religious ceremonies throughout the world. The mere act of saying certain words sets the stage for the speaker, and observers, to step outside of the realm of the ordinary, into a magical mindset where they can suspend disbelief and have faith that the words themselves have inherent power. Charms and incantations are not for communication; they are secret - they might be nonsense words, in an unusual language, or sentences recited backwards. Magical words often hold meaning only for those with exclusive, inner knowledge of the ways and customs of the group who use them. They serve to include - and exclude - people at will; they are a thing of power, both in the understanding of them, and the effects they have upon the intended target: stage magicians use the words 'Hocus pocus' to complete their magical acts, while 'Abracadabra' was used by the Romans in the 3rd century CE to rid malaria sufferers of their disease by wearing the word in an amulet.

In folk and fairy tales, incantations often appear as charms and spells. In religious settings they can be mantras - a sacred sound, syllable or word that is often repeated - that help to induce an altered state of consciousness in meditation. Prayer itself can be a form of incantation, often giving glory to a deity or ancestor, thanking them, or asking for help. Christian monks, at one time, recited prayers called loricas for protection. Knights, too, emblazoned these on their shields and armour, reciting them before battle to ensure their safety - the word itself means 'armour' or 'breastplate'. Both the Vikings and Anglo-Saxons used charms for healing. The Merseburg incantations are some of the most famous, with one used to heal the sprained hoof of the Norse god Baldr's wounded horse, and another to escape the bonds of an enemy. In ancient Rome, a carmen verse could be used as a curse to harm an enemy, or a plea to heal a loved one, or to increase wealth, or make crops bountiful.

> The *Carmina Gadelica* is a collection of Scottish chants, charms and spells collected in the 19th century




Wodan recites the Merseburg charm: 'Like bone-sprain, so blood-sprain, so joint-sprain: Bone to bone, blood to blood, joints to joints, so may they be mended'


Ali Baba, the infamous thief, watched the 40 thieves use the magical words 'Open Sesame' to enact their will, and open their secret cave

© Creative Commons; Daderot

Éliphas Lévi

A holy man with a chequered past and a prison record, Lévi defined occultism well into the first decade of the 20th century

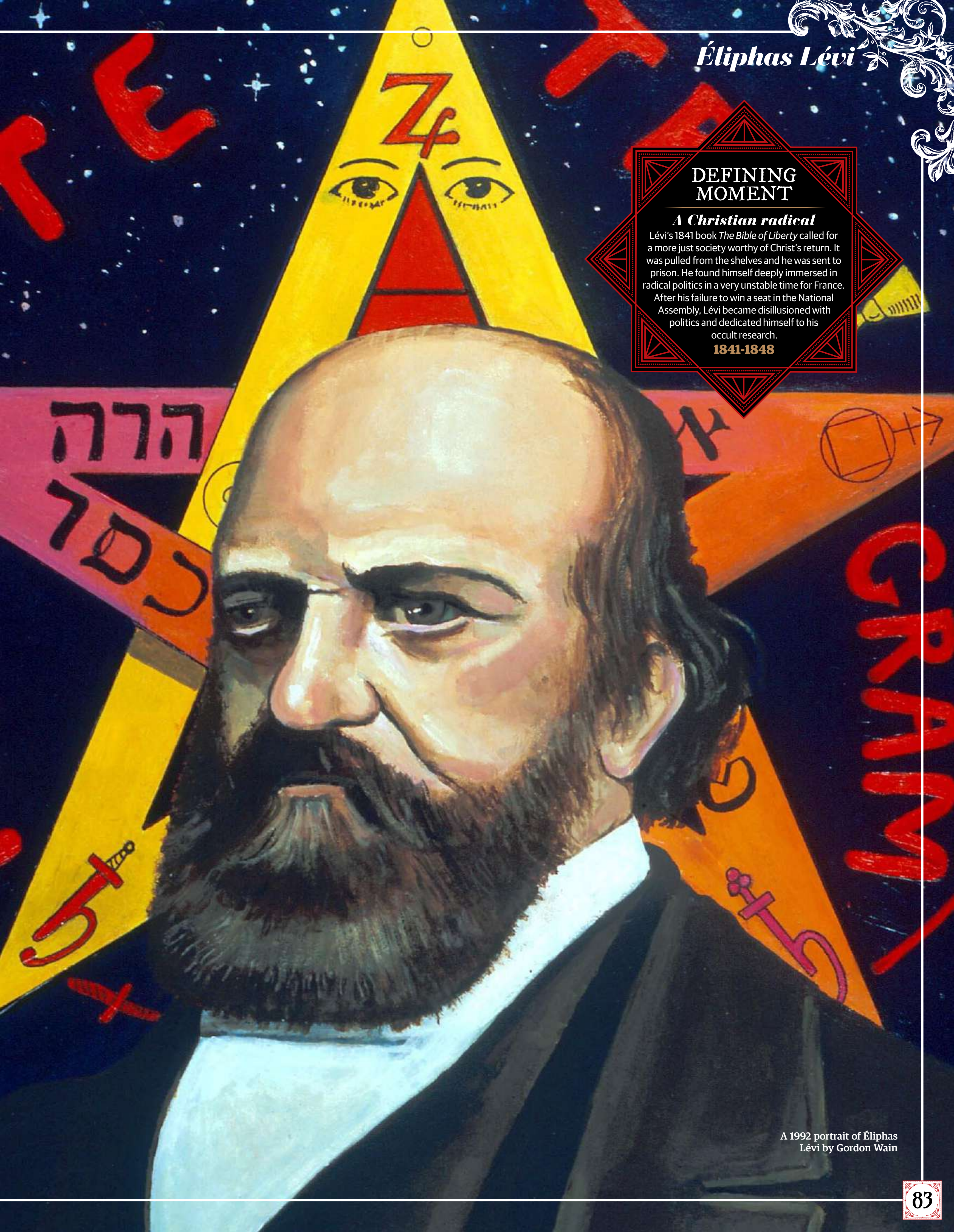
Written by James Hoare

One of the most seemingly contradictory figures in the history of the occult, Éliphas Lévi – born Alphonse-Louis Constant in France in 1810 – was a devout Christian. He was a former seminary student who used the title Abbé (Abbot) and wore the robes to match, yet this man of the cloth inspired Aleister Crowley so directly that the "Wickedest Man in the World" claimed to be inhabited by his reincarnated soul. Lévi went to prison twice for his radical politics, and he was dogged by rumours of a relationship with a teenage girl that saw him tossed out of the church.

Lévi's approach to magic found its home in Britain with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the writer AE Waite, a man who more than any other popularised the tarot and its interpretation in the English-speaking world. These are all associations that inspire shrill accusations of Satanism and blasphemy that still endure in some quarters, yet Lévi was adamant that all he did was true to his faith.

A zealous Christian from an early age, Alphonse-Louis Constant's religious awakening at his first Holy Communion was so all-consuming that the parish priest dispatched him to the seminary of St Nicholas, where he would train for a life in the Roman Catholic church. At St Nicholas the young scholar fell under the influence of the Abbé Frere, who dabbled in the emerging occult sciences of mesmerism (the belief that an invisible magnetic force governed all living things and could be used to heal them) and Martinism (a form of Christian mysticism popular in 19th century France).

The Abbé was soon relieved of his duties and the atmosphere turned hostile to those students who had fallen under his influence. The deflated Constant left St Nicholas for the seminary of



DEFINING MOMENT

A Christian radical

Lévi's 1841 book *The Bible of Liberty* called for a more just society worthy of Christ's return. It was pulled from the shelves and he was sent to prison. He found himself deeply immersed in radical politics in a very unstable time for France. After his failure to win a seat in the National Assembly, Lévi became disillusioned with politics and dedicated himself to his occult research.

1841-1848

A 1992 portrait of Éliphas Lévi by Gordon Wain

The look of black magic

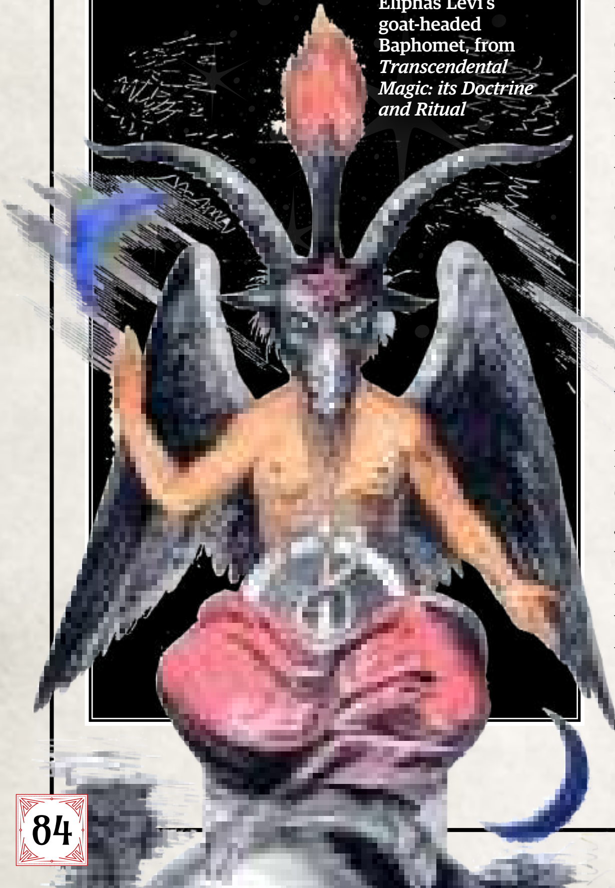
Although Lévi saw magic through a Christian lens, his work has done much to codify what it is we think of when we picture "black magic."

The idea of a point-up pentagram being 'good' and a point-down pentagram being 'bad' comes from Lévi and is now an established part of the iconography of occultism, Satanism and contemporary paganism.

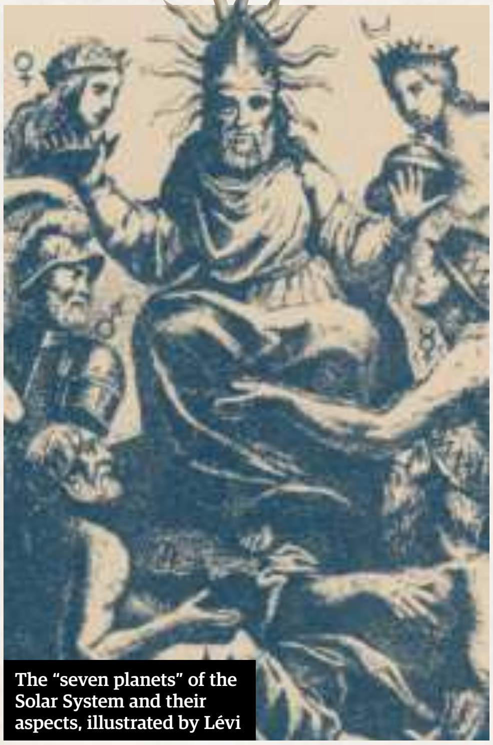
Another diabolic legacy is the depiction of Baphomet as a goat-headed figure (also referred to as the Goat of Mendes). The deity supposedly worshipped by the Knights Templar was described in various ways under torture – a severed head, a head with three faces, a skull, and a cat head – but it was Lévi who illustrated the 'devil goat' for the first time in *Dogma and Ritual of High Magic*.

Lévi's Baphomet imagery became incredibly important to Aleister Crowley in the development of Thelema and influenced the Devil card in AE Waite's popular Rider-Waite tarot deck, firmly bedding it into the popular imagination. Perhaps its most famous big screen appearance is in the climax of 1968 Hammer horror film *The Devil Rides Out*.

Éliphas Lévi was also a significant influence on the writer HP Lovecraft at the time he was developing his 'Cthulhu Mythos', and Lovecraft refers to him directly in his 1927 short story *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, lifting an evocation straight from Waite's translation of *Dogma and Ritual*...



Éliphas Lévi's goat-headed Baphomet, from *Transcendental Magic: its Doctrine and Ritual*



The "seven planets" of the Solar System and their aspects, illustrated by Lévi

Constant's birthplace in Paris's sixth arrondissement. His father was a shoemaker

St Suplice where "they focused on the slow and painful learning of ignorance." But at least he was left to his own devices. It was here that he first became troubled by contradictions within the Bible – that a loving God could also wield eternal damnation as a flail.

Now a young man, it was at St Suplice where Constant had his controversial relationship with the 14-year old Adèle Allenbach. According to Constant she was a penniless waif that he was entrusted with preparing for communion, and slowly they grew "affectionate". His "innocent and open" relationship attracted no small amount of gossip, but he claims that rather than being defrocked, he was never actually ordained as a priest and instead departed "as a matter of conscience."

Constant took teaching jobs by day and spent his nights working on his masterpiece, *The Bible of Liberty*, which he felt addressed both his doctrinal anxieties and his growing frustration at social injustice. He was offered a bribe by the church to junk his manuscript, but refused, remaking wryly that it was the first time the church had deemed him worthy of financial support.

The Bible of Liberty was published on 13 February 1841 and remained on sale for about an hour before copies were seized by the police and Constant was sentenced to eight months for "impiety" and "advocating insurrection". His trial made him into something of a celebrity among the radicals of Paris.

Released in April 1842 (he served 11 months in the end), Constant tried to keep himself to himself, he penned a few articles for radical newspapers but it was distinct sideline to his study. He was given a second chance with the church and moved out of Paris to take up employment under his mother's maiden name – but the press caught up with him, declaring at first he had died and then announcing his "resurrection" and exposing his whereabouts.

In the ensuing scandal, Constant returned to Paris and continued to publish his religious and political writings, some of which he claimed were inspired by visions. On 3 February 1847 Constant was hauled before the judge again for his polemic *The Voice of Famine* and was charged with "disturbing public order by provoking and inciting hatred between the several classes of society".

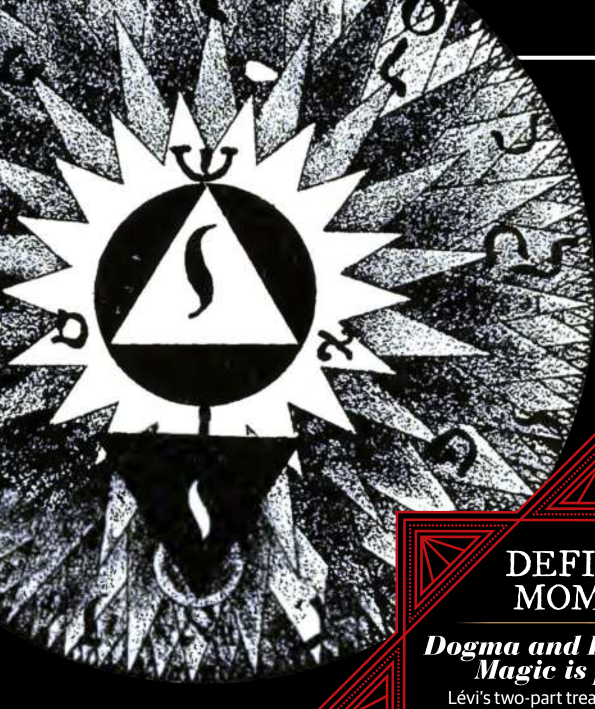
In the end he only served six months, thanks to an appeal from his pregnant young wife, the sculptor Marie-Noémi Cadiot. Over the rest of the decade following the February Revolution of 1848 –

DEFINING MOMENT

The father of the Occult Revival

Until his death in 1875, Lévi made his living through his writing and teaching. In 1854, Lévi visited London for the first time and the audience asked him to invoke the spirit of the ancient Greek magician Apollonius of Tyana – Spiritualism being the dominant occult art in Britain at the time. He was taken aback, but gave it a go.

1850s-1875



The kabbalistic tarot pentacle from Lévi's 1855 masterpiece, *Dogma and Ritual in High Magic*

DEFINING MOMENT

Dogma and Ritual in High Magic is published

Lévi's two-part treatise on ritual magic is regarded as a foundation stone in the 19th century occult revival, but unlike many of his contemporaries and followers it was based on fairly rigid scholarship. Lévi dedicated his life to untangling the mysteries of the universe and reconciling them with his staunch Catholicism.

1854-1856

where he stood for the French National Assembly and failed to win a seat – he became increasingly disillusioned with politics and began to dedicate himself fully to spiritual matters.

Specifically he became enthused with Kabbalah, a form of ancient Jewish mysticism (historians now believe it dates from the 12th century) based around the idea that the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the numbers one to ten each hold specific power.

In 1853 – the year his wife left him – Constant began publishing under the pseudonym Éliphas Lévi Zaed (although the Zaed part was rarely used), which he asserted was the Hebrew translation of his birth name. In 1854 and 1855 the two volumes of his text *Dogma and Ritual of High Magic* were published.

Abbé Constant, the Christian revolutionary was gone, and in his place stood Éliphas Lévi, the father of modern occultism. *Dogma and Ritual...* explained that science and religion were one and the same, and magic was the means by which these two forces could be manipulated.

The most powerful kabbalistic combination was the Tetragrammaton – JHVH – the four Hebrew characters that make up the name of God or Jehovah. Lévi linked these to the four suits of the tarot deck (wands, cups, swords and coins/pentangles) through a Renaissance tradition that linked them to the four elements (fire, water, air and earth), establishing the tarot as the overarching framework for his particular interpretation of the magical art. To put it simply: if kabbalah was the secret language of the universe, than the tarot was the dictionary defining it.

Like the Kabbalah, the tarot deck had 22 major arcana (the 'hero' cards such as The Fool, Death and The Hanged Man) and the suits of the minor arcana (such as the Three of Swords or Eight of Wands) were numbered one through ten.

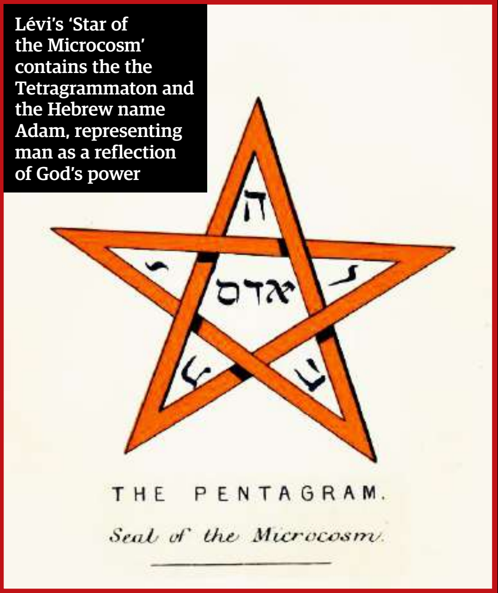
1860's *The History of Magic* and 1861's *The Key to the Great Mysteries* developed those themes (which he repeated ad infinitum in later texts, rattled out at a plenteous rate). In them Lévi reconciled accounts of sorcery, alchemy, and Biblical miracles into a single belief system that saw Jesus Christ stand alongside Renaissance alchemist and astrologer Paracelsus as magi, men who reshaped the world through magic.

Lévi's work didn't catch on in France with anywhere near the fervour with which it was adopted in the English-speaking world. There it became part of the rich stew of cherry-picked superstition and pagan leftovers that informed the ritual magic of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the belief in ancient mystical masters espoused by the Russian-born émigré Madame Blavatsky and her Theosophical Society.

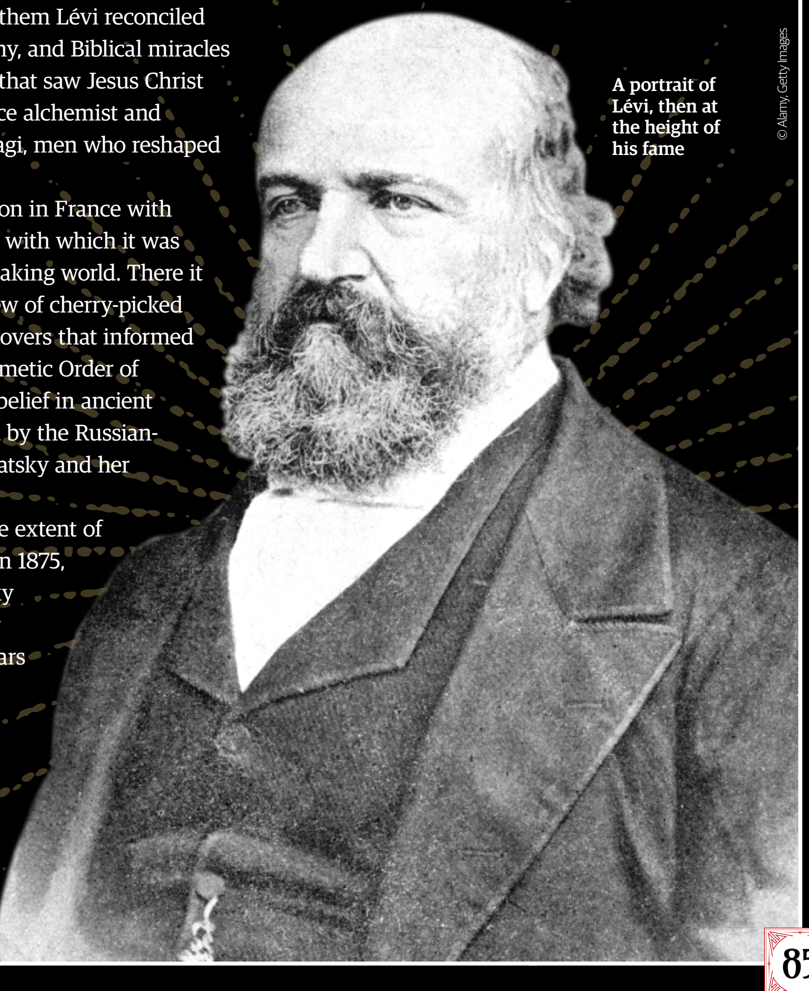
Lévi didn't live to see the extent of his occult legacy. He died in 1875, three years before Blavatsky published *Isis Unveiled*, her first major work, and 12 years before three disillusioned Freemasons in smoking jackets gathered together to explore the mysteries of the universe, passing their wisdom on to such luminaries as Aleister Crowley, Dion Fortune, AE Waite and WB Yeats. Perhaps it was for the best. As a dedicated Christian who believed he had cracked the code at the heart of his – and indeed all – faith, he may well have been appalled by the rise of self-absorbed hedonists and humanists like Crowley, who brushed Lévi's deeply held Christian convictions to one side as a mere prop in order to rummage through his rituals.

Or perhaps Éliphas Lévi, that most unlikely father of occultism and most unorthodox of true believers, would simply have turned the other cheek.

> "Father, forgive them,' said Jesus, 'for they know not what they do.' People of good sense whoever you may be, I will add, do not listen to them, for they know not what they say."
>
> ***The Great Secret or Occultism Unveiled* (1868)**



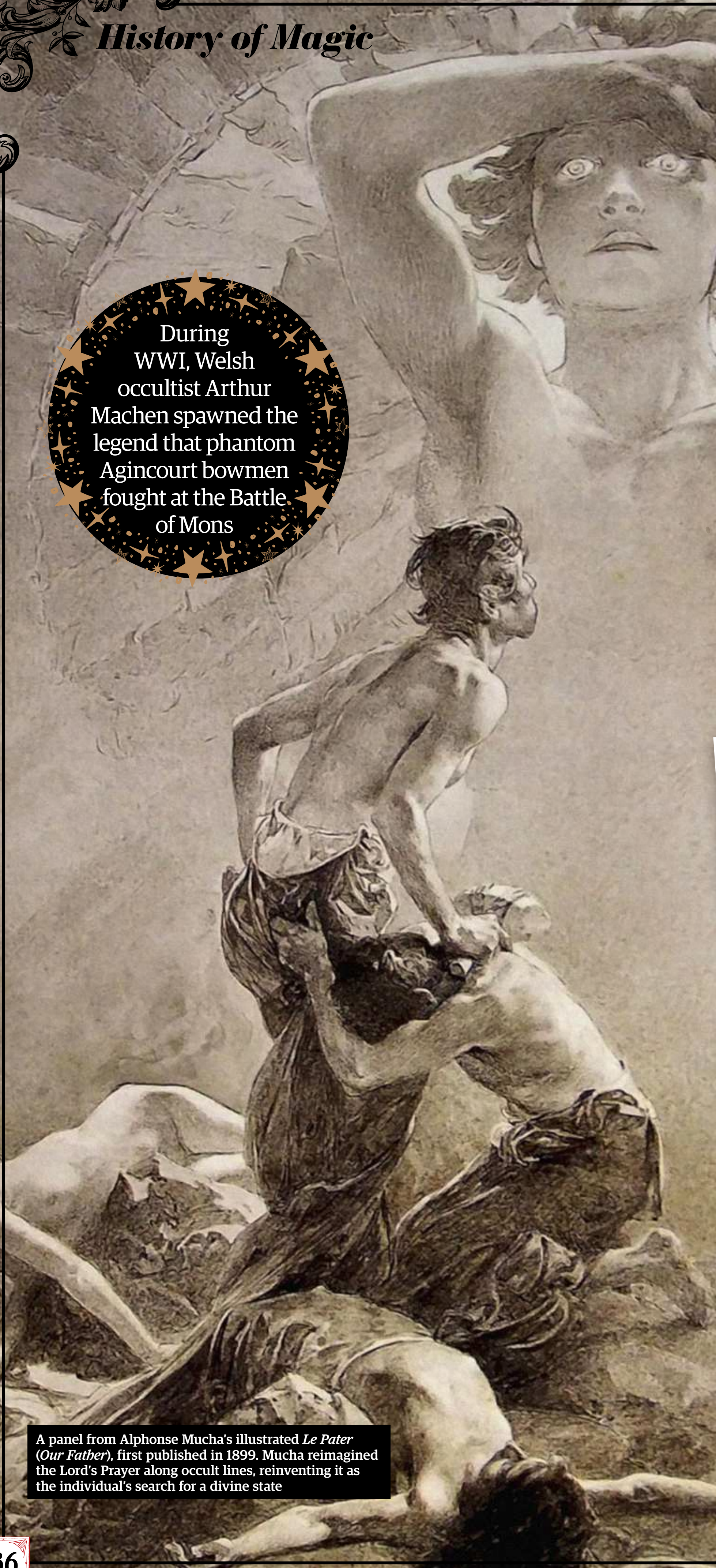
Lévi's 'Star of the Microcosm' contains the the Tetragrammaton and the Hebrew name Adam, representing man as a reflection of God's power



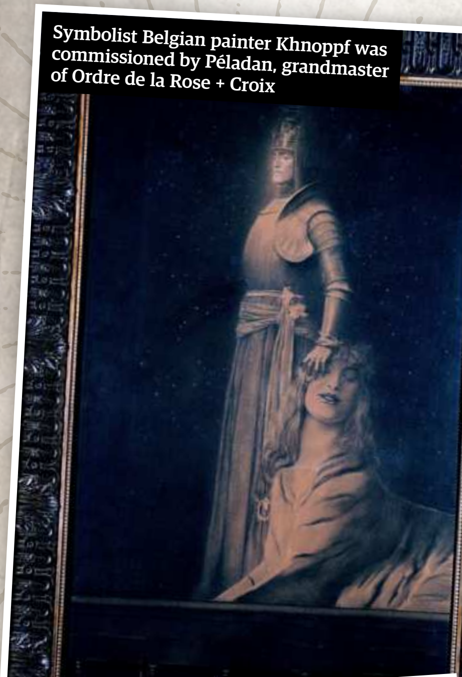
A portrait of Lévi, then at the height of his fame

© Alamy, Getty Images

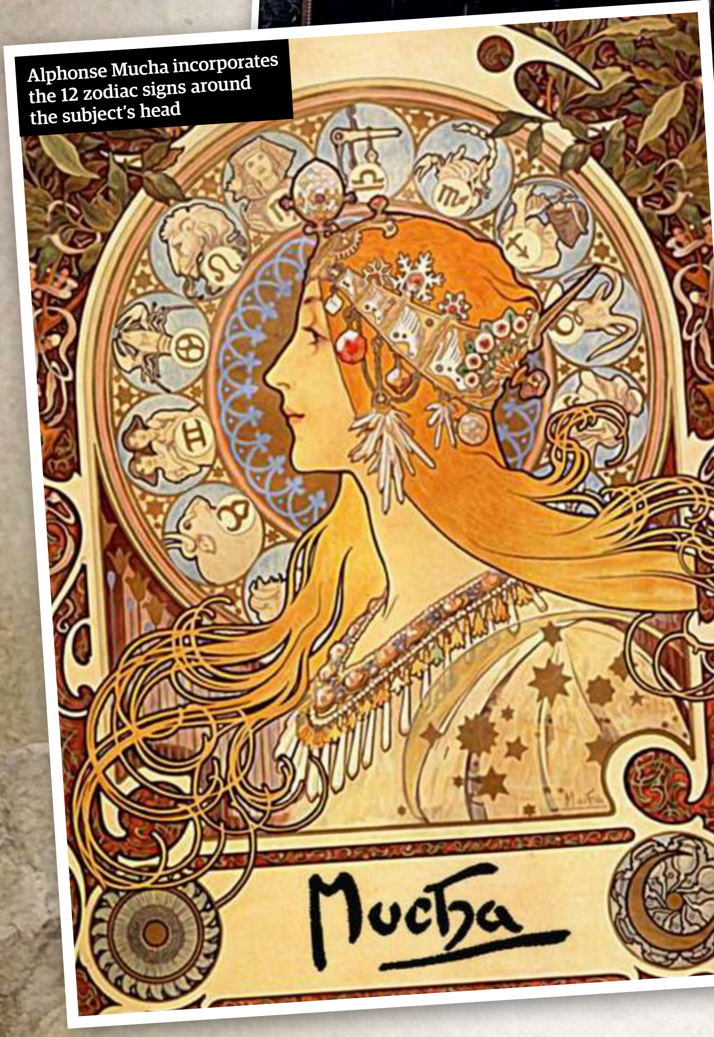
During WWI, Welsh occultist Arthur Machen spawned the legend that phantom Agincourt bowmen fought at the Battle of Mons



A panel from Alphonse Mucha's illustrated *Le Pater* (*Our Father*), first published in 1899. Mucha reimagined the Lord's Prayer along occult lines, reinventing it as the individual's search for a divine state



Symbolist Belgian painter Khnoppf was commissioned by Péladan, grandmaster of Ordre de la Rose + Croix



Alphonse Mucha incorporates the 12 zodiac signs around the subject's head

Theosophy, Thelema & the Golden Dawn

As the lights dimmed on the 19th century, faith and progress broke like waves on the anxious, restless mood of the age. The dead reached out to the living, miracle cures were sought, and gurus gathered followers into secret societies

Written by James Hoare

In the summer of 1894, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle found himself in a thatched cottage on the Dorset coast. An old smuggler's haunt, it would have made the perfect seaside getaway, but the great Victorian scribe was here on business.

Appropriately for the creator of Sherlock Holmes, Doyle and his two colleagues, Frank Podmore and Dr Sydney Scott, were here to solve a mystery. They were looking for a ghost.

Like a gaslit *Most Haunted*, the trio set up with a camera and magnesium tripwire, hoping to take a photograph that would expose a spirit where the naked eye could not, but no spectral presence saw fit to glide in front of the lens.

> The Symbolist movement was an influence on Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud, who used imagery to unlock the unconscious

The following night their host's 20-year-old son came to offer the investigators drinks; when they refused and began to leave, he rushed back in and begged them to stay. Suddenly there was a crashing and banging in the kitchen, as if some malevolent force were flinging open the cupboards in a rage.

The diagnosis: the son did it, with help. But over Doyle's lifetime his telling of the story changed dramatically as he became more enthused with Spiritualism – the belief the dead walk among us and can be summoned – and he disowned the official report composed by his more rigorous colleagues at the Society of Psychical Research.

To the 21st century perspective it is contradictory and faintly absurd that the creator of literature's most famous rationalist could be so seemingly irrational, but Doyle is a perfect example of the spirit of the age. Born a Roman Catholic and educated by Jesuits, Doyle became agnostic and then ended his life a Spiritualist. He was passionate about vaccination and briefly studied to be an ophthalmologist, but then took all manner of supernatural chicanery as a matter of faith.

The late 19th century was a period of great intellectual restlessness. The French called it 'fin de siècle', which means simply 'end of the century', but captures something that English does not; a sense of pessimism and defeat, uncertainty and frustration, decadence and immorality.

The late 18th century and much of the 19th had been defined by the relentless march of scientific progress, and society had been shaped around it; populations had decamped from the villages to the cities that were bringing new dangers and destroying old ways of life; the centuries-old supremacy of traditional religion had been winded by Charles Darwin, and political thought was dominated by the alarming new creeds of socialism and nationalism.

The social challenges posed by this collision of progress and faith were dealt with in various ways; sometimes by the rejection of one for the other, but also by the creative reconciliation of the two. In fact, the idea that the 18th-century Enlightenment gave way to inevitable secularisation is actually misleading. The truth is that the late 19th century saw belief reborn in surprising new guises.

In France, liberal Catholicism pushed for social reform, while in Britain and the United States, muscular Christian activism took to the streets to change the world one tea urn at a time. In the art world, the French Symbolists drew heavily on the gothic imagery of Edgar Allan Poe to reflect imagination and reject realism, while in Germany the bombastic opera of Richard Wagner wove a new Germanic mythology with nationalist undertones and disastrous consequences for the looming 20th century. Secret societies thrived in the space where old identities – whether regional or religious – seemed uncertain.

Many were political, but others took on an occult flavour. The best known of the non-magical bunch were the Freemasons – really just an old boy's network using elaborate rituals as a social bond – who were active across much of Europe and North America, and among Britain's intellectual elite, the Society for Psychical Research stroked their chins and applied (as far as they were concerned) rigorous scientific study to debate the veracity of poltergeists and possessions.

Some secret societies were contemporary reimaginings of older branches of Christian mysticism – the Martinists, Templars and Rosicrucians, and their myriad variants, schisms and spin-offs – but hot on their heels came new sects that cribbed notes from their holier-than-thou predecessors and created something dynamic and new, that would redefine occultism outside of Scripture's shadow.

Most notable of these was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and, under Britain's infamous Aleister Crowley, the previously benign Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO). OTO had its origins as a German response to Freemasonry, but morphed into the vessel for Crowley's new faith, Thelema, in the first decade of the 20th century.

Another world unto itself was the Theosophical Society, founded in the US by a Russian emigré Spiritualist called Helena Blavatsky. From her beginnings as an exploratory traveller, Madame Blavatsky had become increasingly enthused by Hindu and Buddhist thought and from the 1880s the Theosophical Society – which relocated its HQ to India – became focused on attaining higher states of consciousness by following the esoteric philosophy of the Masters of the Ancient Wisdom, which its followers believed was an ancient religion that had influenced the foundation of all others. The abrasive German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche explained it best, writing in 1872's *The Birth of Tragedy*:

What does our great historic hunger signify, our clutching about us for countless other cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge if not the loss of myth, the mythic home, the mythic womb?

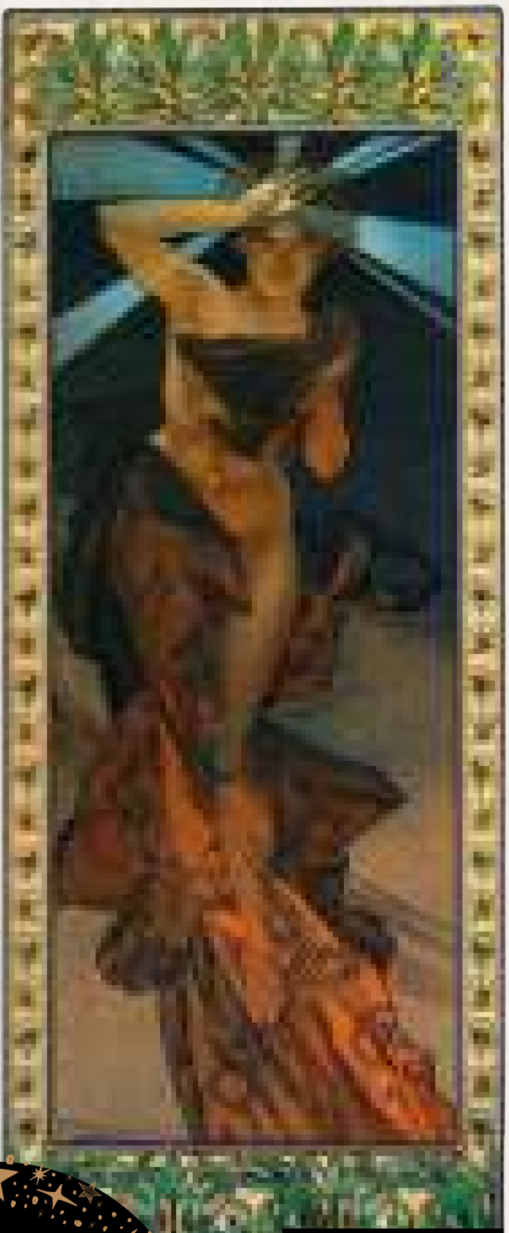
In the German-speaking world the search for a "mythic womb" was especially potent and the völkisch ('folkish') movement emerged in the early 19th century and morphed – thanks to the influence of Theosophy – into Armanism or Ariosophy in the 1890s. Austrian antiquarians Guido von List and Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels believed there was a spiritual link between the Germanic people and their land, and the ancient Germans were a nobler and purer bunch before the arrival of "foreign" influences like Christianity, industrialisation, and democracy, as well as "foreign" races like Slavs and Jews.

This unique combination of elements, albeit with an Irish-republican rather than virulently racist character, would emerge outside of Germany in the Celtic Revival poetry of WB Yeats, a rare romantic nationalist in London's occult ecosystem of glorified gentlemen's supper clubs, as well as in the work of his fellow Irishmen, the artist and poet George William "AE" Russell, and the dramatist and fantasy novelist Lord Dunsany.

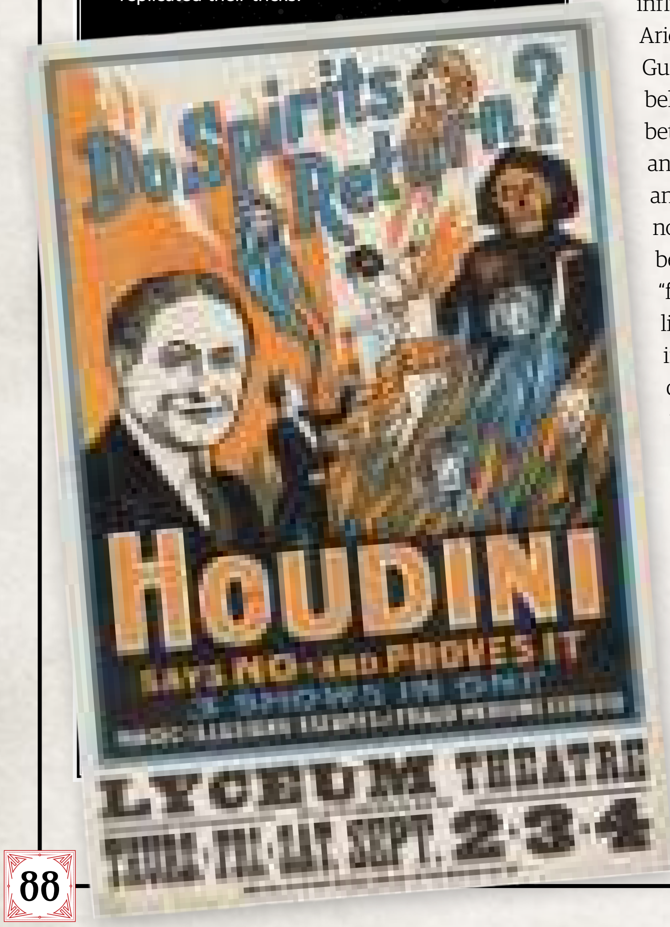
"I often think I would put this belief in magic from me if I could," wrote Yeats in his 1903 pamphlet, *Ideas of Good and Evil*, "for I have come to see or to imagine, in men and women, in houses, in handicrafts, in nearly all sights and sounds, a certain evil, a certain ugliness, that comes from the slow perishing through the centuries of a quality of mind that made this belief and its evidences common over the world."

In contrast to this nationalist primitivism, French occultism was largely a metropolitan affair not much bothered by a retreat into wilderness or

Blavatsky's syncretic synthesis of similar ideas from different traditions still influences today's practitioners



Light radiates from the forehead of Alphonse Mucha's *Morning Star*



Harry Houdini pulls no punches in this 1909 poster for his medium-busting stage show

Spooks and charlatans

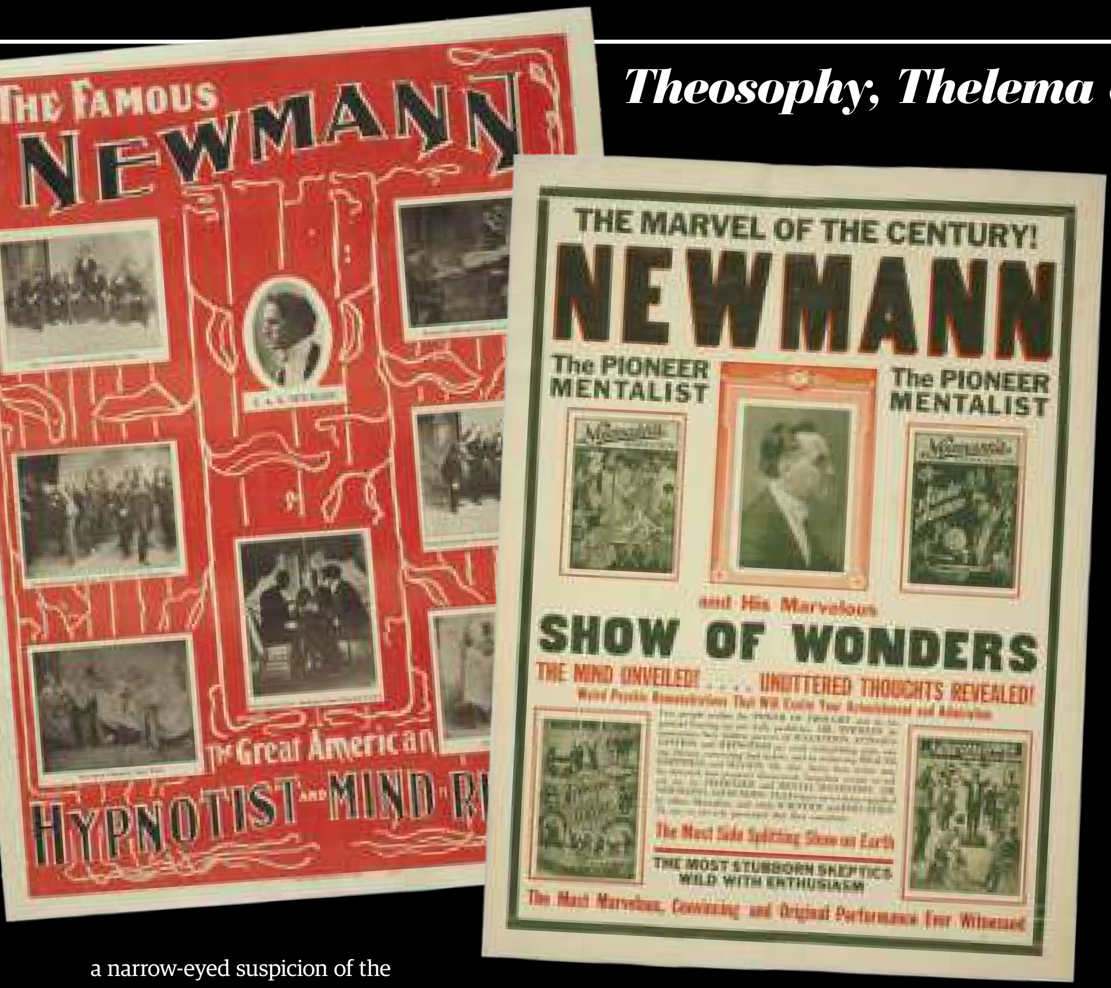
From the very beginnings of Spiritualism, some of its practitioners were being outed as frauds who took advantage of the bereaved.

The movement began in rural New York with Margaret and Kate Fox, two sisters who in 1848 convinced their older sister their home was haunted by rapping the floor with an apple on a piece of string. They soon took what was effectively their circus act on the road with the help of some trusting Quakers who formed the core of the new Spiritualist movement.

Though the Fox sisters were outed and confessed in 1888, their dubious craft continued through countless others who used hidden accomplices, fake arms, or string to move objects, and double exposure to create haunting 'spirit photographs' that exposed spectral visitors where none had been previously visible.

The fraudulent Spiritualists had their opponents though and faced condemnation from some religious authorities, were subject to vigorous testing by the Society of Physical Research, and were dogged by the illusionist Harry Houdini, who recognised a perversion of his own craft at work.

Though he was an old friend of Arthur Conan Doyle, Houdini and Doyle began to trade blows in the press as Houdini campaigned to expose Spiritualists by touring a stage show in which he replicated their tricks.


THE FAMOUS
NEWMANN
The Great American
HYPNOTIST AND MIND R
THE MARVEL OF THE CENTURY!
NEWMANN
The PIONEER MENTALIST
The PIONEER MENTALIST
and His Marvelous
SHOW OF WONDERS
THE MIND UNVEILED! ... UNUTTERED THOUGHTS REVEALED!
The Most Side Splitting Show on Earth
THE MOST STUBBORN SKEPTICS WILD WITH ENTHUSIASM
The Most Marvelous, Convincing and Original Performance Ever Witnessed

Newmann the Great was a renowned hypnotist in the United States

a narrow-eyed suspicion of the modern world. It was defined broadly by prayer and absinthe, for those not quite ready to cut their strings to Mother Church and the decadent dandies-about-town.

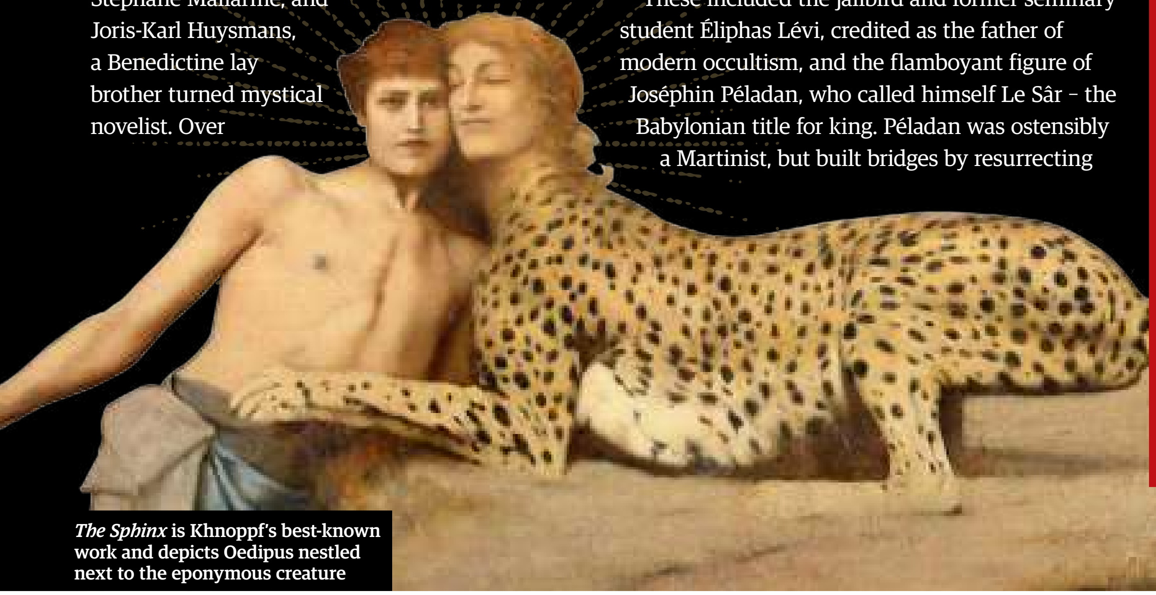
Symbolism was an art movement inspired by the writer Charles Baudelaire. He translated Edgar Allan Poe into French and sought to find through his work the au-delà – the world beyond our own – with the routes available to this lusty band being dreams, substance abuse, sex and the occult.

Among their number were artists Fernand Khnopff, Jan Toorop and Jean Delville, and writers André Gide, Stephane Mallarmé, and Joris-Karl Huysmans, a Benedictine lay brother turned mystical novelist. Over the fence in Art Nouveau, the Paris-resident Czech artist Alphonse Mucha dabbled in Theosophy and occultism, and conjured mythic, folkloric figures in his stylised, dreamlike work.

Catholic apostasy provided France with its most dramatic characters, often rooted in Martinism (a belief that man could return to the spiritual state of grace he had enjoyed in the Garden of Eden), Gnosticism (belief that the physical world is debased but man can ascend in spirit) or the Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism based on the power of the Hebrew alphabet and numerals), or all three.

These included the jailbird and former seminary student Éliphas Lévi, credited as the father of modern occultism, and the flamboyant figure of Joséphin Péladan, who called himself Le Sâr – the Babylonian title for king. Péladan was ostensibly a Martinist, but built bridges by resurrecting

> Upset by the growing scepticism of the Society for Psychical Research, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle led a mass resignation



The Sphinx is Khnopff's best-known work and depicts Oedipus nestled next to the eponymous creature

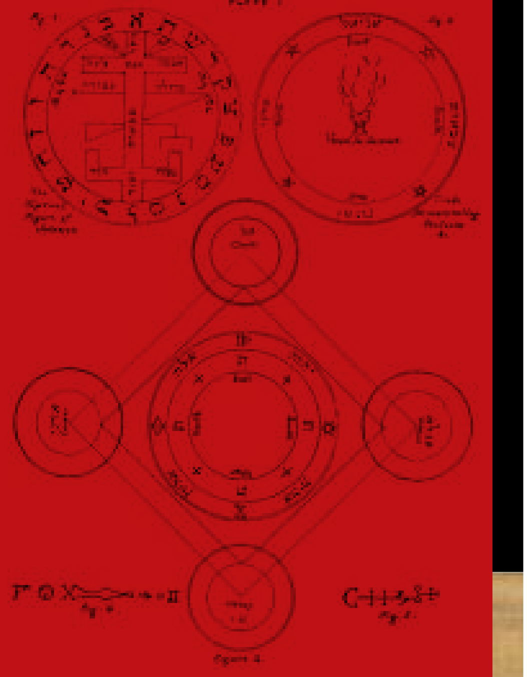
A new Dawn

No other organisation conjures up such feverish imaginings, was associated with so many larger than life characters (not all of whom were actually members), nor played such a vital role in transitioning the occult from the late 19th century and into the 20th as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

The origin story is a bit of a fog of self-mythologising courtesy of some of its more infamous members such as Aleister Crowley, but what we know for fact is that the Golden Dawn was founded in 1887 by Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, William Robert Woodman and William Wynn Westcott, based on a what they claimed was a recently deciphered Rosicrucian manuscript. They dutifully built their new society around the rituals contained within, which they insisted – dubiously – to be of ancient Egyptian origin.

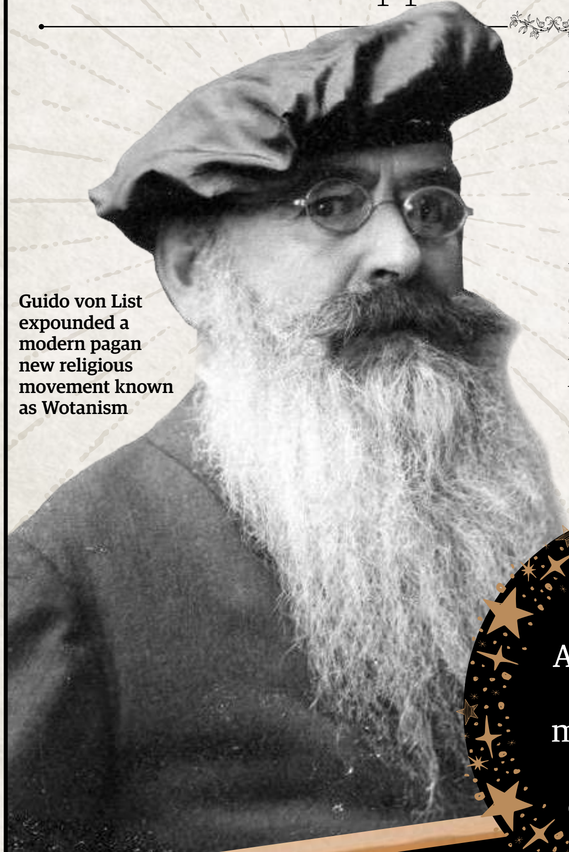
Lineage was incredibly important to late 19th century occultists, but their influences were more recent and that's what made the Golden Dawn such a potent distillation of the entire Occult Revival to date. It liberally helped itself to elements of Theosophy, cosmology, Kabbalah rituals, astrology, alchemy, astral travel and the tarot, and Rosicrucian rites and initiations.

Unlike earlier orders, the focus of the Golden Dawn was on practical magic and ritual, and so it found itself attracting the hungriest and most ambitious of occultists. These fiercely intelligent and competitive intellectuals thrived in the hierarchy of different ranks and levels, and – especially Crowley – had a marvellous time pulling the society apart in 1903.



Kabbalist sigils from Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers' translation of the Renaissance grimoire *The Key of Solomon*

Magic didn't mean a retreat from Christianity, nor was it in opposition to scientific thinking



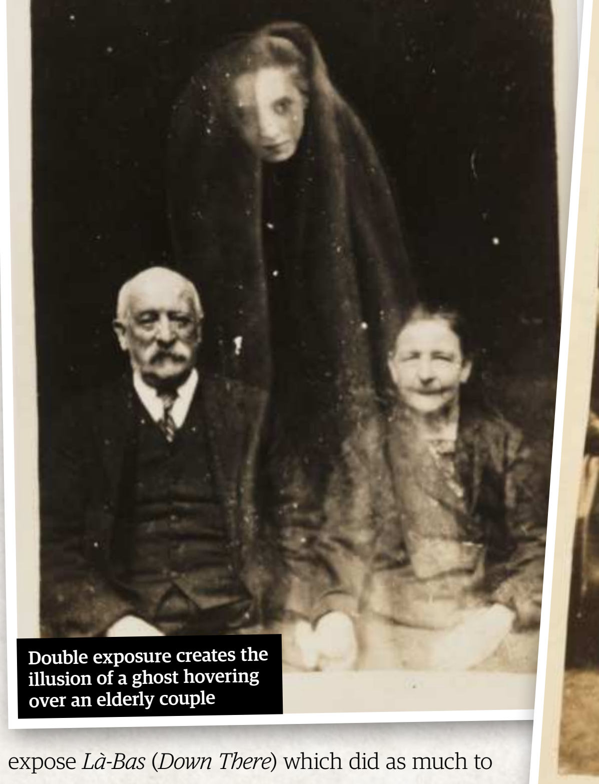
Guido von List expounded a modern pagan new religious movement known as Wotanism

the Rosicrucian Brotherhood as a modern secret society alongside the prominent occultists Stanislas de Guaita and Gérard Encausse, and founded the Salon de la Rose+Croix for the Symbolists to exhibit their work and share their ideas.

A rather shrill and scandal-prone bunch, the leading lights of French occultism feuded constantly. Stanislas de Guaïta hated Joseph Boullan, a defrocked priest and alleged Satanist who was rumoured to have killed a child during a black mass, and practiced spiritual healing through sexual intercourse.

When Boullan passed away in 1893, Joris-Karl Huysmans accused Guaïta and Péladan of having killed him with black magic. Huysmans lashed out in a heavily fictionalised pulp expose *Là-Bas* (*Down There*) which did as much to inspire the look of Satanism than anything that real occultists ever did.

Queen Victoria and Abraham Lincoln both met with mediums in order to contact their deceased loved ones



Double exposure creates the illusion of a ghost hovering over an elderly couple

Just as magic didn't necessarily mean a retreat from Christianity, nor was it necessarily in opposition to scientific thinking. Instead the occult was another means to interpret a world that was only just beginning to be understood in any real kind of detail.

In a sense too, the growing confidence of the scientific worldview in tipping over the old certainties left what remained indecipherable up for grabs by concepts that seemed just as esoteric to the layman as bacteria or electrons.

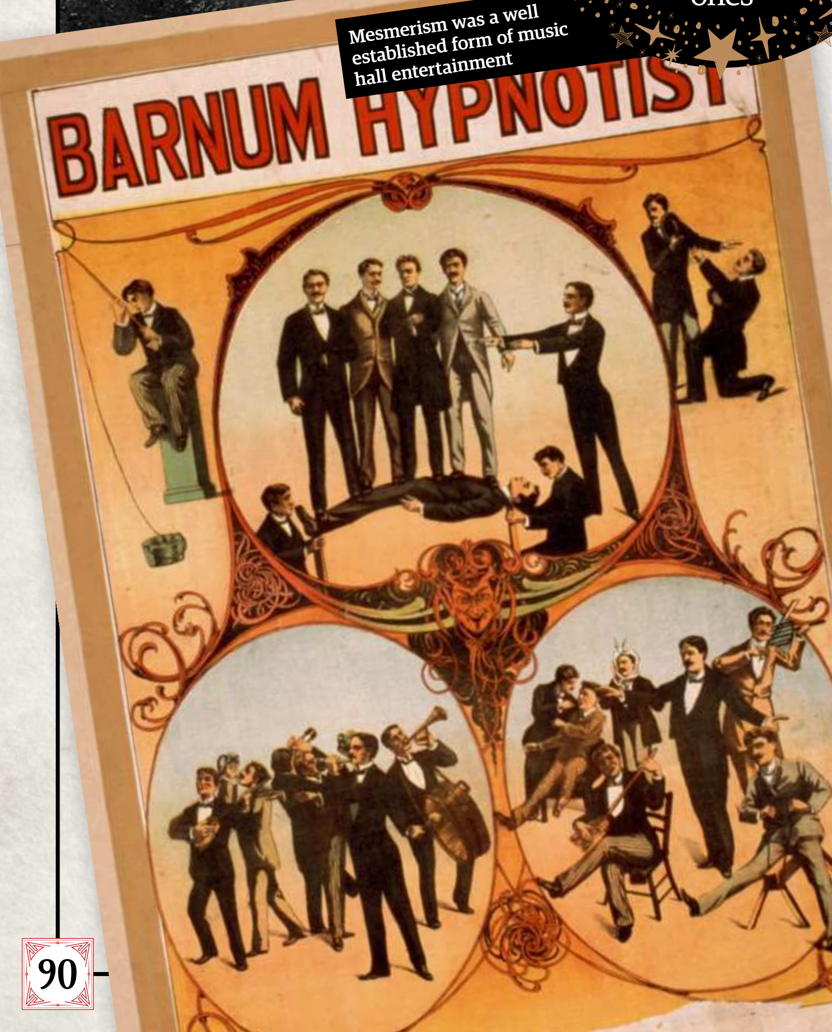
Art movements love a good manifesto, and so the Belgian Symbolist Jean Delville spared few words in explaining his worldview in 1900's *New Mission in Art*:

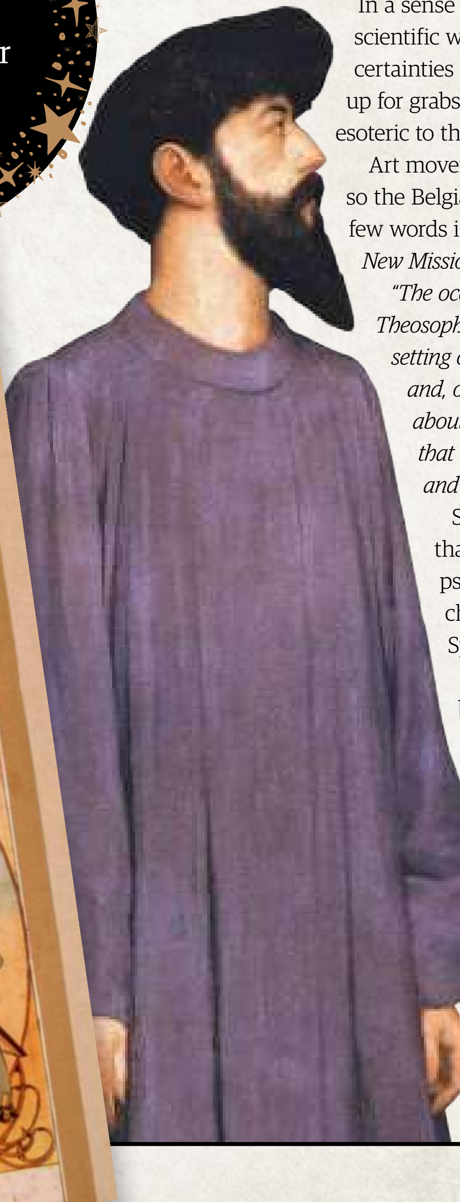
"The occult sciences, the lofty teachings of Theosophy, and experimental Spiritualism, are setting out to conquer the future, and, on the threshold of a new age, are about to establish the Science of the Ideal; that is the synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy."

Some ideas clung so close to science that they still wear its cast-offs as pseudo-science or parapsychology, chief among them the doctrines of Spiritualism and mesmerism.

Mesmerism wasn't just hypnosis by another name. This art – the same one by which wandering holy man Grigori Rasputin claimed to be able to stem the internal bleeding of poor bloody Alexei, ill-fated heir to the Russian throne – was based on the premise that all living beings were governed by magnetic forces. The word "mesmerise" takes its name from its inventor,

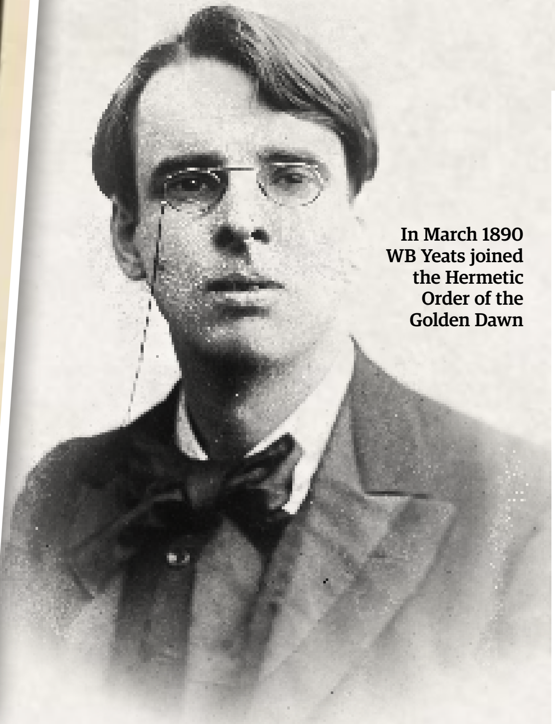
Mesmerism was a well established form of music hall entertainment





Péladan's *Le vice suprême* was interwoven with Rosicrucian and occult themes

A séance appears to have attracted a ghostly visitor



In March 1890 WB Yeats joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn

the 18th century German physician Franz Anton Mesmer, who also coined "animal magnetism", not to refer to physical attraction but the pull of celestial bodies on living creatures.

Through the use of magnetised wands and other props, the practitioner could claim to cure the vaguely defined health issues that have always been fair game for quacks. Though quickly discredited, it lived on in the imagination of occultists and had a second wind from 1841 when Scottish surgeon James Braid certified the veracity of a French mesmerist's act and became convinced that suggestion was more important than magnets – which was spot on, although not in the way he thought – and replaced it with hypnotism.

Thanks to Braid, mesmerism not only became an established part of medical orthodoxy as both a sedative and means of prompting the body to heal itself, but returned to music halls and dinner parties as a popular phenomenon.

Spiritualism was born in the United States in the 1850s, and soon spread to the Old World. It existed independently of much of the day's occult milieu, and it captured the public imagination in a way that ritual magic and esoteric secret societies failed to, dominating theatres with seances in which mediums purported to receive messages from dead loved ones. Lights dimmed, tables rattled and 'ectoplasm' was vomited forth by the unknown, unseen ghostly entities that had apparently been summoned.

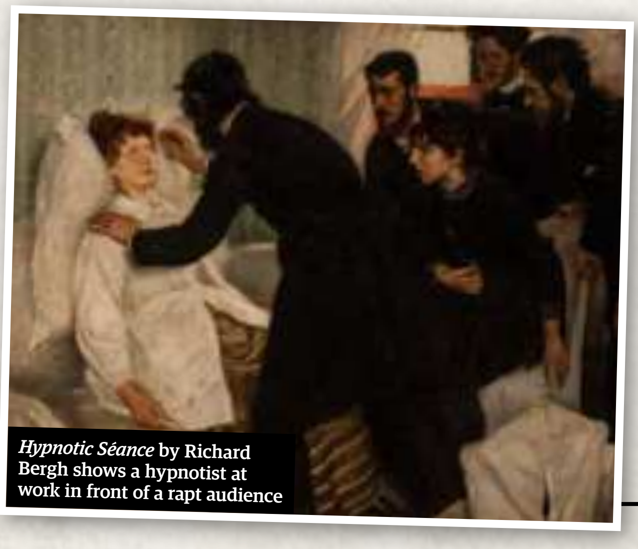
Curiously, while much of this history has been dominated by men, Spiritualism was incredibly popular with women and many of the practising mediums were female. Indeed, the only woman mentioned so far – Helena Blavatsky – started out as a Spiritualist.

For many though, Spiritualism conjures up one name, that of its most ardent evangelist: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Though his forthright position on the supernatural dealt a hammer blow to his credibility later in his career, in the context of the late 19th century at least, there was little remarkable, contradictory or – compared to some of the other characters we've encountered – controversial about his passions.

"There is nothing scientifically impossible," he wrote, in defence of the (hoax) photographs of the Cottingley Fairies, "so far as I can see, in some people seeing things that are invisible to others."

> Charles Henry Allan Bennett was more interested in enlightenment, and established the first Buddhist mission in Britain



Hypnotic Séance by Richard Bergh shows a hypnotist at work in front of a rapt audience

Revival and survivals

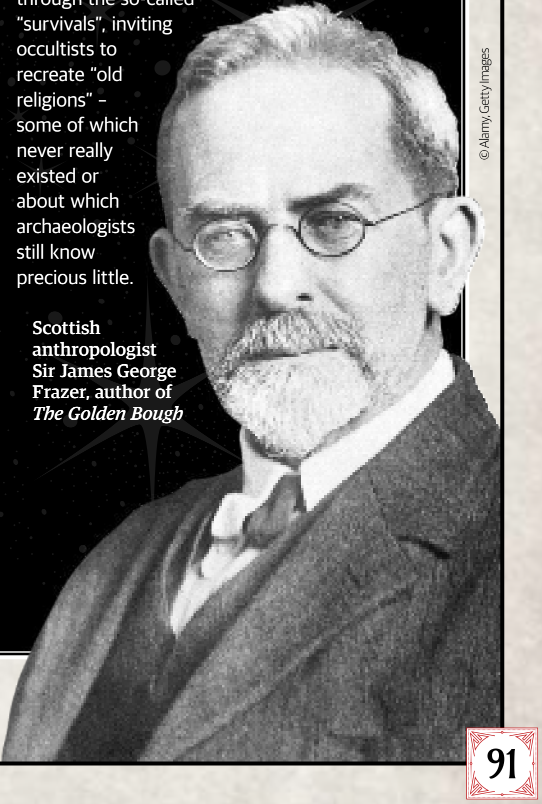
An unintended consequence of the scientific method was the idea that folklore and superstition represented a glimpse of pre-Christian religious practices, a premise that birthed new belief systems across the late 19th and early 20th century.

Anthropology emerged as a discipline in the mid-1800s and Europe's overseas empires offered an opportunity for inquiring minds to understand the nature of belief among what they once called the 'savages'.

Religion was organised and classified like insects under glass in an act of linear Eurocentric evolution in which fetishism (the imbuing of physical objects or locations with religious importance) gave way to polytheism (belief in multiple deities) which in turn gave way to monotheism (belief in a single deity), which was finally superseded by science.

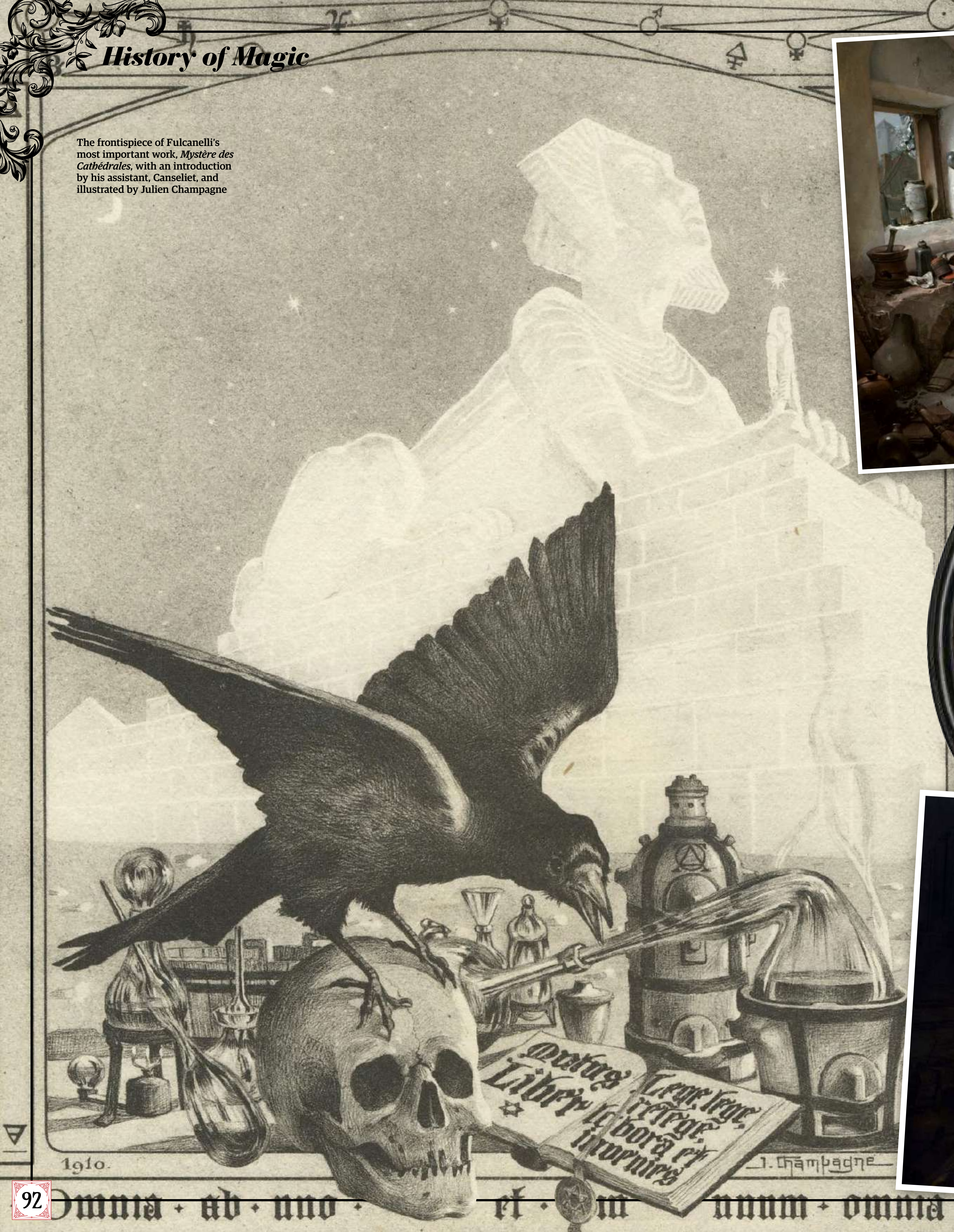
The anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor coined the idea of "survivals" in 1871, proposing that folklore, ritual and superstition was in fact a remnant of earlier belief systems. Tylor's theory prompted a flurry of folklore collection and study, most infamously in 13 volumes of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*, which were published between 1892 and 1913. (It was re-subtitled *A Study in Magic and Religion* in its second and subsequent editions.)

Frazer's hastily drawn conclusions and cherry-picking research would prove profoundly influential in underscoring the alleged commonalities of pre-Christian mythology, and through the so-called "survivals", inviting occultists to recreate "old religions" – some of which never really existed or about which archaeologists still know precious little.



Scottish anthropologist Sir James George Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*

© Alamy, Getty Images


Mutus
Liber
Lege, lege,
relege,
labora et
invenies
1910.
J. Champagne
Omnia · ab · uno · et · in · unum · omnia

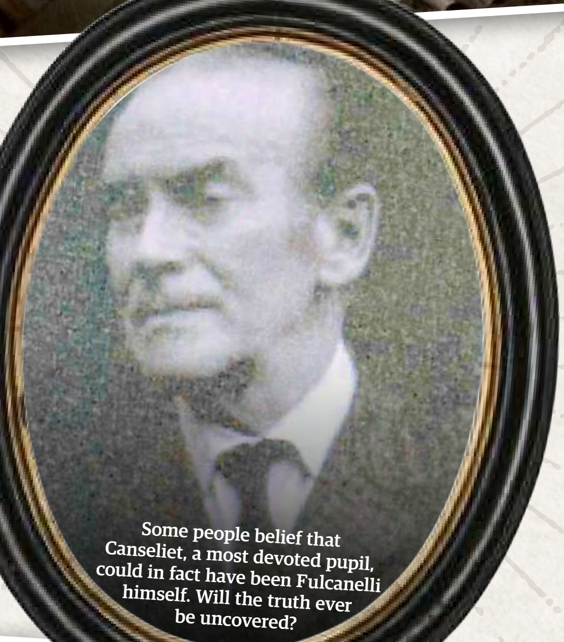
The frontispiece of Fulcanelli's most important work, *Mystère des Cathédrales*, with an introduction by his assistant, Canseliet, and illustrated by Julien Champagne

'Fulcanelli' is a mixture of 'Vulcan', Roman god of fire, with either 'Elijah', an Abrahamic prophet, or 'El' - the Canaanite name for God - the sacred fire

Fulcanelli

While little is known about the mysterious esoteric author, either a man or legend, the craze for this great occultist has become a cultural phenomenon

Written by Dee Dee Chainey



Some people belief that Canseliet, a most devoted pupil, could in fact have been Fulcanelli himself. Will the truth ever be uncovered?

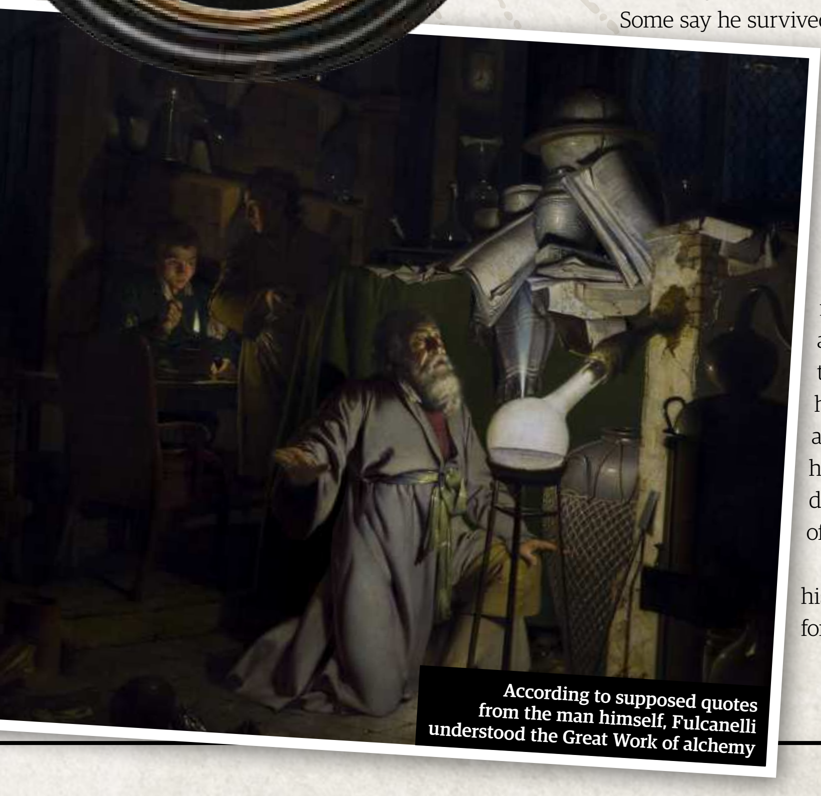
Like so many legendary historical figures, Fulcanelli's real identity is shrouded in mystery. It is likely that he was French, and some claim he was born in the first half of the 19th century, in 1839. His works can unquestionably be attributed to someone well versed in alchemy. His most elaborate claim to success is that his assistant, Eugène Canseliet, transformed lead into gold in the presence of witnesses, attaining the alchemist's dream. Fulcanelli is said to have disappeared in the 1920s after imparting his knowledge to his assistants. Some say he survived World War II, only to disappear after the Liberation of Paris in 1944. Canseliet claimed that his master appeared to him a final time in Seville in 1953, asking, "Do you recognise me?" He reports in his writings that the man appeared 20 years younger than the last time he'd seen him, yet would have been over a 100 at this stage, meaning he was thought to have finally discovered the secret of immortality.

> Fulcanelli is alleged to have appeared in Paris in 1937 to warn an acquaintance about the dangers of nuclear weaponry

Many theories unveiling his true face have been put forward: from an array of French occultists, to a member of the former French royal family, to the Count of Saint-Germain - an 18th century alchemist also thought to have gained immortality. Some suggest that Canseliet may have been the man himself, or even his illustrator, Jean-Julien Hubert Champagne, himself an occultist.

Others suggest that Fulcanelli is the pen name of a collective: the Frères d'Heliopolis, including Canseliet, Champagne, and either the occultist and Freemason, Jules Boucher, or Pierre Dujols, a librarian from Paris.

His two existing books - published after his disappearance in the 1920s - were *Le Mystère des Cathédrales*, and *Les Demeures Philosophales*. Both attempt to uncover the alchemical symbolism of important monuments like Notre-Dame Cathedral, and comment on the scientific and alchemical knowledge of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Arcane and full of Greek and Latin puns, it is obvious that the books intended to exclude anyone without a firm grounding in alchemy. They were initially published in a small print run of 300, yet the works gained popularity after their reprinting in the 1950s and '60s. Soon, the craze around the mysterious disappearing alchemist began. Notes for a third book were rumoured, *Finis Gloriae Mundi* - entrusted, once more, to Canseliet; apparently Fulcanelli decided that the time was never right for publication. Another title of the same name, published by Jean-Marc Savary in 1999, and signed 'Fulcanelli', was widely believed to be a counterfeit.



According to supposed quotes from the man himself, Fulcanelli understood the Great Work of alchemy

© Getty Images

The magickal life of Aleister Crowley

Mystic, philosopher, author, poet, controversialist, adventurer through the landscape of the mind – there were few taboos that the so-called 'wickedest man in the world' did not explore

Written by Joel McIver

If the late Aleister Crowley had been born in 1975, rather than 1875, his public antics as a magician, drug user and sexual experimenter would have been welcomed, or at least tolerated, in the modern world. In his own era, however, his keen interest in occult thought and practice, plus his deliberate attempts to gain infamy for its own sake, provoked rather than intrigued the public, and he was castigated as a serious threat. In reality, Crowley was simply an interesting, if unorthodox, man who loved the attention that his activities brought to him. There is no equivalent to him today – which makes the story of his life all the more compelling.

Much has been written about Crowley as an occult thinker and activist, and also about his personal life. In fact, these two sides of his character are too deeply entwined for them to be meaningfully separated. From his earliest years, he found himself in conflict with his surroundings – and it's little wonder that he grew up to be a man profoundly at odds with the mores of his era.

Edward Crowley, as he was known until his late teens, was born at 30 Clarendon Square in Royal Leamington Spa, Warwickshire, to a family of comfortable means. His father, also Edward Crowley, owned a share in a successful brewing business, Crowley's Alton Ales, and had already retired by the time his son was born. Like his wife Emily, Edward senior was a member of the Exclusive Brethren, a faction of the better-known Plymouth Brethren, which was a Christian movement. He is said to have

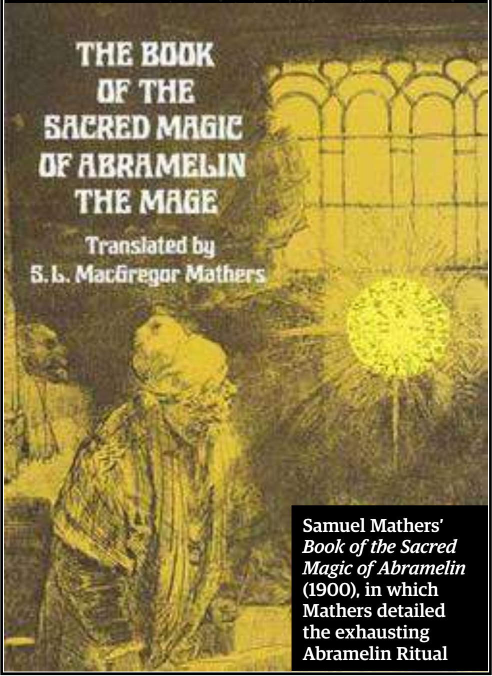
Ceremonial garments were an integral part of Crowley's rituals, but they often caused people to dismiss him as a serious thinker

How to perform the Abramelin Ritual

Abramelin was a 14th-century Egyptian magician and the subject of study by Crowley's associate Samual Mathers. He is said to have created the Abramelin Ritual (or Operation), in which a devout person can receive "knowledge and conversation of their Higher Guardian Angel". The Ritual was originally intended to last a gruelling 18 months, but Crowley adapted it to last a more manageable six. Fancy a crack at it? Here's how…

First, you need to be in good health, between 25 and 50 years old, and religious. It doesn't matter which religion you adhere to, you just need to acknowledge a god of some kind. You'll need two rooms, a prayer room and an adjoining bedroom, in which you will remain most of the time. For the first two months, spend the hours of daylight (yes, all of them) praying to your chosen deity, studying holy books and taking the occasional walk. For the second two months, include a day of fasting in each week.

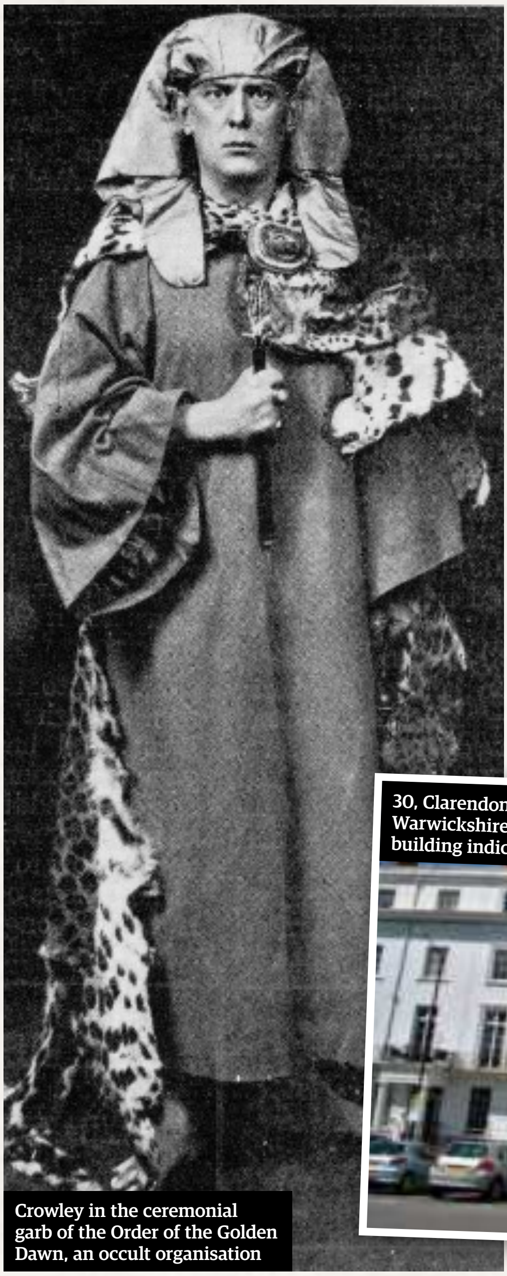
Over the last two months, wear a special tunic, burn charcoal, build an altar and get ready for the big day. When it comes, anoint yourself in sacred oil, write Crowley's sacred texts on your altar, invoke the 12 Kings and Dukes of Hell – including Lucifer, Satan, Leviathan and Belial – and await the arrival of your angelic visitor.



Samuel Mathers' *Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin* (1900), in which Mathers detailed the exhausting Abramelin Ritual

worked as a preacher for the Brethren and to have read Bible chapters to his wife and son every day. Certain lurid passages in the Book of Revelation concerning the Beast, its number 666 and the tale of the Scarlet Woman fascinated the young Crowley.

An early turning point for the boy came in 1883, when his father died of tongue cancer. Aged only 11, Crowley inherited one-third of his father's wealth, but this does not seem to have made him happy. His relationship with his mother deteriorated; he later wrote that "her powerful maternal instincts were suppressed by religion to the point that she became, after her husband's death, a brainless bigot of the most narrow, logical and inhuman type."



Crowley in the ceremonial garb of the Order of the Golden Dawn, an occult organisation

Emily's brother Tom Bishop, also a conservative Christian, found no favour with his nephew, who described him with the perhaps exaggerated words "no more cruel fanatic, no meaner villain, ever walked the Earth".

Worst of all, when Crowley began to cause trouble at his school, Ebor Preparatory School in Cambridge, its owner, the Reverend Henry d'Arcy Champney, was quick and sadistic in his discipline. Crowley was punished by being placed in solitaire, or 'Coventry', where no student or master could speak to him, or he to them. He was fed only with bread and water, forced to walk around the schoolroom and isolated on the playground. These sadistic measures led him to describe his stay at Ebor as "a boyhood in hell". A satanic edge was lent by his mother's nickname for her son - "the Beast".

The pressures of the young Crowley's situation led him to ill health, first with albuminuria, a kidney disorder. This was no doubt worsened by some of the other boys at Ebor, who saw fit to punch him in the kidneys when they discovered his illness. In due course, his mother and uncle removed him from the tender mercies of Reverend Champney and sent him to Malvern College and Tonbridge School, neither of which he enjoyed.

Ultimately he was educated by private tutors in Eastbourne, East Sussex, against whose Christian teachings the teenage Crowley rebelled by pointing out flaws in the Bible. Privately, he enjoyed the forbidden practice of masturbation, of which he wrote: "Here was certainly a sin worth sinning, and I applied myself with characteristic vigour to its practice." This habit soon graduated to sleeping with local prostitutes, one of whom he later contracted gonorrhoea from.

From today's comparatively enlightened point of view, we can see clearly that the scene was set

30, Clarendon Square in Leamington Spa, Warwickshire - Crowley's birthplace. The building indicates the wealth of his family

"Crowley rebelled by pointing out flaws in the Bible" and the seeds were sown for Crowley's career of anti-establishment activities to begin. Here was a young man, barely more than a boy, jolted by his early death of his father (who he later described as a "hero", apparently sincerely), repelled by over-eager disciplinarians and contemptuous of revealed religion. As an intelligent, educated youth with money of his own, he was free - once he left the family home, at least - to wreak the worst kind of havoc that he could.

In 1895, Crowley adopted the first name Aleister. "I had read in some book or other," he wrote, "that the most favourable name for becoming famous was one consisting of a dactyl [a long syllable plus two short ones] followed by a spondee [two long syllables], as at the end of a hexameter: like Jeremy Taylor. 'Aleister Crowley' fulfilled these conditions and Aleister is the Gaelic form of Alexander. To adopt it would satisfy my romantic ideals."

In line with his new identity, Crowley developed new interests - chess and mountaineering among them, both of which he indulged after beginning a degree in philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge. He also wrote poetry for student newspapers such as *The Granta* and *Cantab*, switching his degree to English literature.

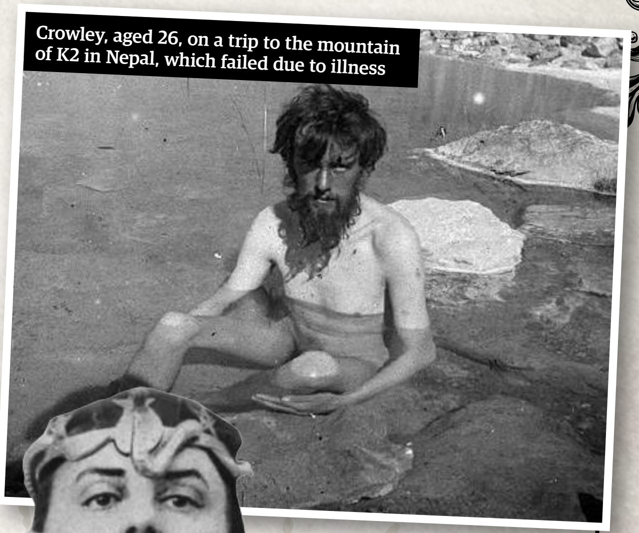
Some biographers suggest that Crowley remained a British Intelligence spy throughout his life

In 1896, at the age of 21, he endured another paradigm change. Before this point Crowley had been just another regular, if rebellious, young man - afterwards, he was a keen devotee of the mystical world. It's thought that he enjoyed a homosexual liaison while on holiday in Sweden, although this was never confirmed. Whatever the case, Crowley returned a changed man, apparently comfortable with being bisexual at a time when this was generally deemed abhorrent. He then struck up a relationship with Herbert Charles Pollitt, the president of the Cambridge University Footlights Dramatic Club, and the two men were a couple for two years, eventually breaking up when Crowley's interest in Western Esotericism became all-consuming.

The final opportunity for Crowley to pursue a 'normal' career came and went in 1897 when he travelled to Russia in the employ of the British Secret Service, which had attempted to enlist him as a spy. However, a spate of illness deterred Crowley from the idea of working for a living - no doubt helped by the fact that he was a man of independent means - and he resolved to pursue his obsession with the occult, now a huge driving passion for him. In 1898 he abandoned his university studies, not bothering to sit his final exams, even though his record indicated that he would probably do well if he had chosen to take them.

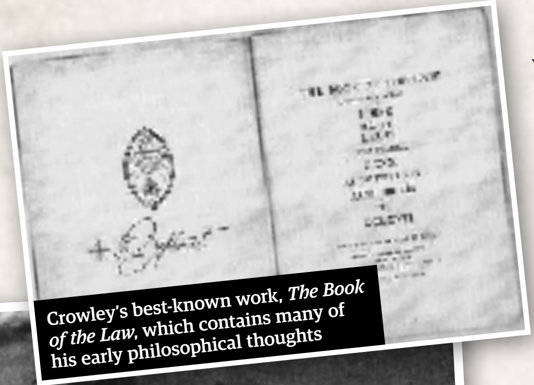
Where did all this unrest come from? Perhaps Crowley's desire to be a poet (he published several poems in 1898, some of them of an erotic nature); possibly his new interest in alchemy (he had met a chemist, Julian L Baker, of similar views to his own); or simply his occult readings.

Two books, AE Waite's *The Book of Black Magic and of Pacts* (1898) and Karl



Crowley, aged 26, on a trip to the mountain of K2 in Nepal, which failed due to illness

Crowley in magisterial mode in 1912. As the First World War approached, his activities began to adopt a political edge



Crowley's best-known work, *The Book of the Law*, which contains many of his early philosophical thoughts

Crowley with his wife Rose and his second daughter Lola Zaza, pictured in 1910

von Eckartshausen's *The Cloud Upon the Sanctuary* (1896), influenced Crowley profoundly. He took an important step into making these interests concrete by joining an occult society known as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which had been founded in 1888. He was introduced to the Order by George Cecil Jones, Baker's brother in-law.

Although Crowley was introduced to two influential people through the Order – its leader Samuel Mathers, and a magician named Charles Henry Allan Bennett, who later shared Crowley's flat in Chancery Lane – his connection with the organisation was rocked by disagreement. While Bennett taught Crowley about the Goetia (the summoning of demons), the ritual use of drugs (in particular hashish, legal to use in Britain until 1928) and Kabbalah (ancient Jewish mysticism), Crowley wanted to move faster through the Order's ranks than was permitted.

By now determined to explore the world of the occult to its limit, in 1899 Crowley purchased a Scottish mansion, Boleskine House, on the shore of Loch Ness. Here he attempted the exhausting Abramelin Operation, a six-month ritual in which a disciple seeks to converse with a personal guardian angel, invoking demonic spirits at the same time. The same year he published more poetry collections, one of which, *Jephthah*, was a success.

Although Crowley made progress through the various grades of the Order of the Golden Dawn, he was unpopular in the group thanks to the reputation he had gained from being a bisexual sybarite, and he conflicted with members including the poet WB Yeats. The Order's London lodge refused to allow him entry into its Second Order, although Samuel Mathers did so after Crowley visited him in Paris. This caused a schism between Mathers and the Order, which became irrevocable when Crowley – on Mathers' orders – attempted to storm and occupy the Order's temple building in Kensington. The case went to court, and the Order won – Crowley and Mathers were expelled.

However, Crowley was just getting started on his bizarre journey, both physical and spiritual. In 1900 he travelled to Mexico, where he settled in Mexico City with a local mistress and worked with Enochian magic. While there he was initiated into the Freemasons, wrote poems and a play and climbed mountains such as Iztaccihuatl, Popocatepetl and Colima. He then headed to San Francisco and Hawaii, enjoying an affair with a married woman named Mary Rogers on the ship for good measure.

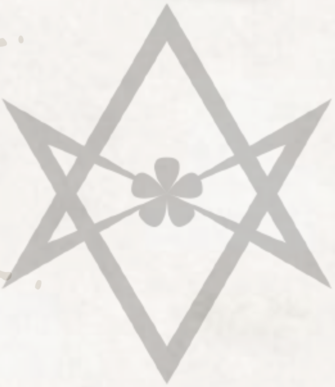
After stopovers in Japan and Hong Kong, Crowley reached Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon), where he met Allan Bennett, who had moved there to study Shaivism; the latter decided to train as a Buddhist monk and went to Burma. Crowley chose to travel to India, studing raja yoga and writing a book of poetry.

The sheer amount of esoteric beliefs that Crowley had absorbed by this point was prodigious. Still only in his late 20s, his greatest period of activity – both physical and mental – was upon him. In 1902 he attempted to climb the mountain K2, which had not yet been conquered at the time. However, influenza, malaria and snow blindness meant that his group only made it to 6,100 metres before turning back.

Later that year he settled in Paris, where he gained a measure of local fame among the urban intelligentsia. As a published poet, occult scholar and man of deviant sexual habits by the standard

Pictured around 1890, Edward Crowley, as he was then known, showed no outward sign of the chaos to come

This 1935 image originally ran in *Picture Post* in 1955 in an article titled 'The Man Who Chose Evil'. But did he?



The hexagram symbol of Thelema is unicursal, meaning that it can be drawn in a single line of the day, he was welcomed in fin-de-siècle Paris and became friends with the painter Gerald Kelly and the author W Somerset Maugham. Art, philosophy and his extraordinarily vivid lifestyle coalesced for Crowley that year, making him one of the outstanding figures of his time – a view that he himself was quick to endorse.

Another key moment in his personal evolution came in 1904. By then Crowley had returned to Boleskine House, married Gerald's sister Rose – deeply distressing the Kelly family in doing so – and travelled with her to Cairo, where the couple claimed to be a prince and princess for their own, arcane reasons. However, this was no simple pleasure trip. While in Cairo, Crowley underwent the most profound spiritual experience of his life.

On 18 March, Rose – who had become delirious, in a form of hallucinatory trance – told Crowley that the Egyptian god Horus was waiting for him. Two days later, she announced, "The Equinox of the Gods has come!" She took him to a nearby museum, containing a 7th-century BCE mortuary stele known as the Stele of Ankh-ef-en-Khonsu. The exhibit's number was 666.

On 8, 9 and 10 April, for exactly one hour at noon on each day, Crowley – seated in his apartment – was addressed by a disembodied voice, identifying itself as Aiwass, the messenger of Horus. He claimed to have written down Aiwass' words verbatim, and soon after turned these words into a book, *Liber AL vel Legis*, better known as *The Book of the Law*. The cornerstone of the book was the statement "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law", which may have been controversial at the time but now resonates in the era of libertarianism. This, and the book itself, became the foundation of a religion, Thelema, which Crowley went on to develop.

70 years after Crowley's death, the 'Do what thou wilt…' credo, *The Book of the Law* and Thelema itself are still very much part of any conversation on the subject of alternative belief systems. It's amazing to think that all this work was essentially done by the time he reached the age of 30. Of course, he continued to work at developing and disseminating his beliefs, returning once more to Boleskine and becoming a father to his first child, a daughter. He and Rose saw fit to saddle the child with the name Nuit Ma Ahathoor Hecate Sappho Jezebel Lilith Crowley, referring to her as Lilith (after the Biblical demon) for convenience.

Although he was admired in occult quarters for his work, Crowley's life was rarely easy from this point on. He fell out with Mathers, claiming that his former colleague had sent an 'astral vampire' to attack him; his books, published through his own Society for the Propagation of Religious Truth, never sold in large numbers; a failed expedition to climb Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas led to the deaths of many of the group; he was forced to leave India after shooting dead a man who tried to attack him; and Lilith sadly died at only two years old. Rose, by now suffering from alcoholism, bore

> "He took an important step into making these interests concrete by joining an occult society"

> The Kanchenjunga climb was conquered in 1955, fifty years after Crowley's unsuccessful attempt

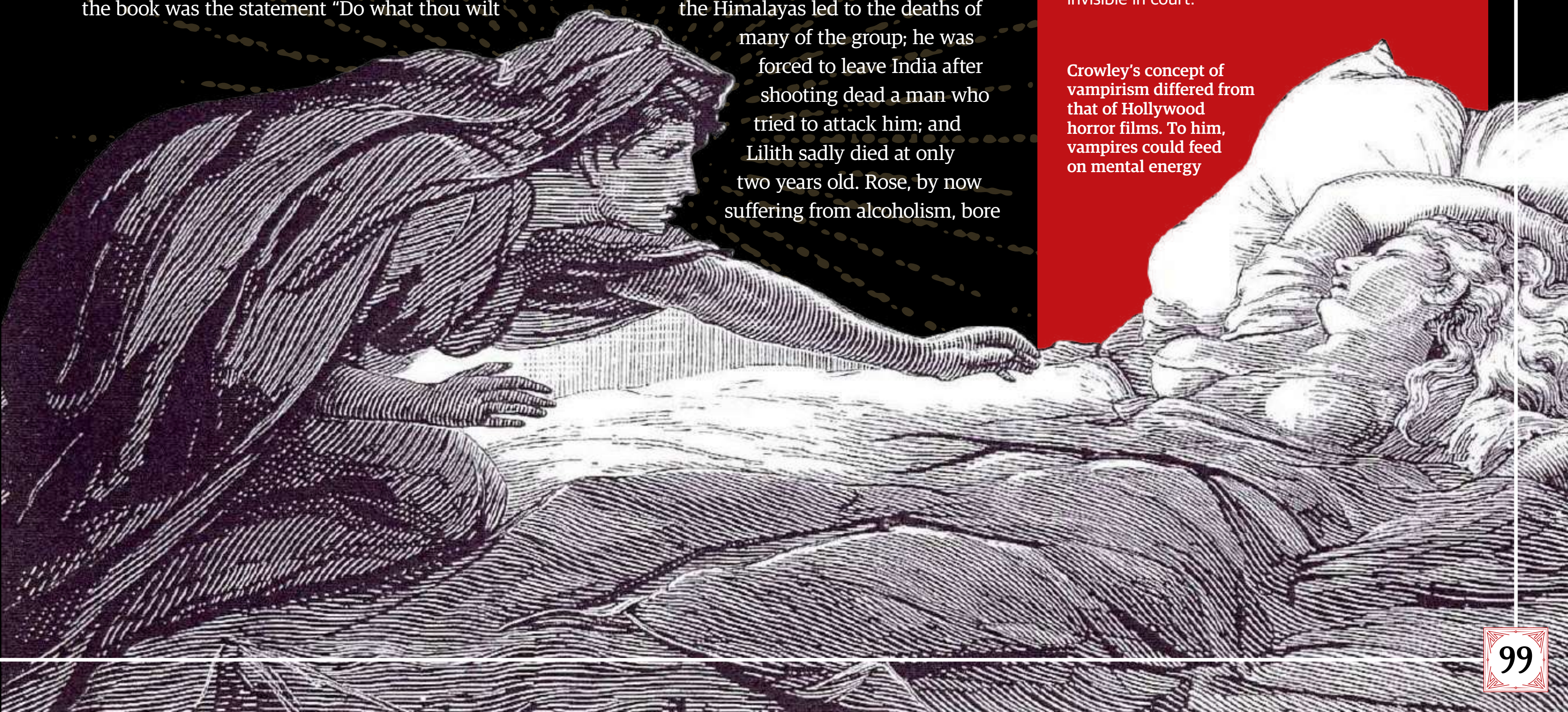
The claims of Crowley

Writing in *The London Sunday Dispatch* on 25 June 1933, Crowley outlined some of his more outrageous claims for the benefit of the readers. Whether they took him seriously or not, who can say? There is no doubt, however, that the tales of his occult explorations made for entertaining reading over tea and toast that morning.

Crowley spent a lot of time discussing his recent attempts to make himself invisible – a feat that he claimed to have partly achieved in front of a mirror. Venturing out in public, he realised that he could not be seen. "I was able to walk out in a scarlet-and-gold robe with a jewelled crown on my head without attracting any attention. They could not see me," he wrote.

Elsewhere, Crowley wrote of his falling-out with his former colleague in the Order of the Golden Dawn, Samuel Mathers, in fantastical terms. In particular, he claimed that Mathers had sent an 'astral vampire' to attack him. Vampirism in general was a subject that fascinated Crowley, but not of the familiar, Dracula-style bloodsucking type. To him, vampires could be psychic in nature, feeding on mental energy. This rendered them difficult to combat, as well as impossible to see – perhaps usefully for the purposes of Crowley's propaganda.

Needless to say, few people took his ideas about vampires seriously, and of his attempts at invisibility, the *Manchester Guardian* drily wrote in 1943, "Mr Crowley declines to make himself invisible in court."



Crowley's concept of vampirism differed from that of Hollywood horror films. To him, vampires could feed on mental energy

a second daughter, Lola Zaza, although Crowley embarked on various affairs before divorcing Rose in 1909.

Through all this, Crowley continued to attempt the Abramelin Operation, completing it at a hotel in Surrey. He claimed afterwards to have achieved a state of samadhi, or union with God, as well as conversing once more with his old chum Aiwass and writing more Thelemic books as a result. Even supposing these supernatural liaisons were not fictional, they did nothing to help his finances, which were running out. He remained in a precarious financial state for the rest of his life, not helped by a growing addiction to cocaine.

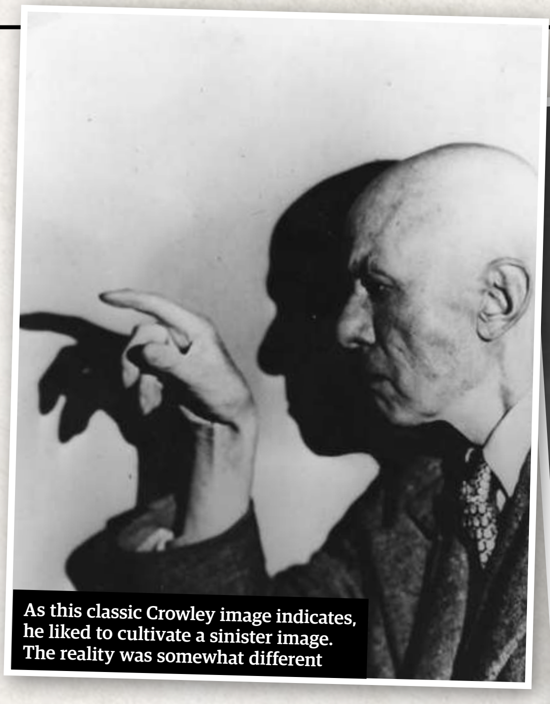
Still, nothing could stop him from defying the conventions of the time. His relationship with a disciple, Victor Neuburg, was based on sadomasochism - while visiting Algeria, the pair engaged in a sex magic ritual on a mountain summit and invoked the demon Choronzon with a blood sacrifice. A vehicle was clearly required for his ongoing philosophy, and so he and George Cecil Jones founded the A∴A∴, a group that infused the ideals of the Order of the Golden Dawn with Thelemic thought. The group's temple was located at 124 Victoria Street in London, where a biannual pamphlet, *The Equinox*, was published.

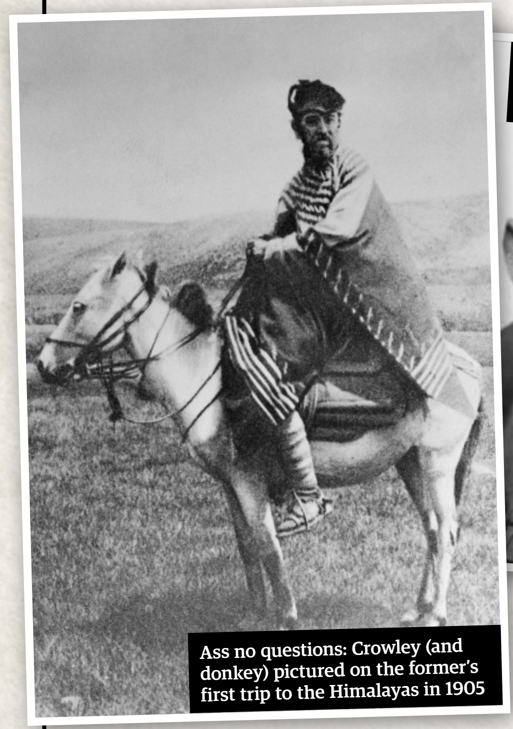
Crowley continued to write and publish into his middle years and beyond. In 1912 his *Book of Lies* gained some notoriety when Theodor Reuss, the head of yet another occult group, the German Ordo Tempo Occultis (OTO), accused Crowley of publishing some of the OTO's secrets. Crowley persuaded Reuss that he was innocent and the two became friends, with Reuss later appointing Crowley as the head of the OTO's British branch, the Mysteria Mystica Maxima. Crowley took upon himself the title of 'Baphomet, X° Supreme Rex and Sovereign Grand Master General of Ireland, Iona, and all the Britons'.

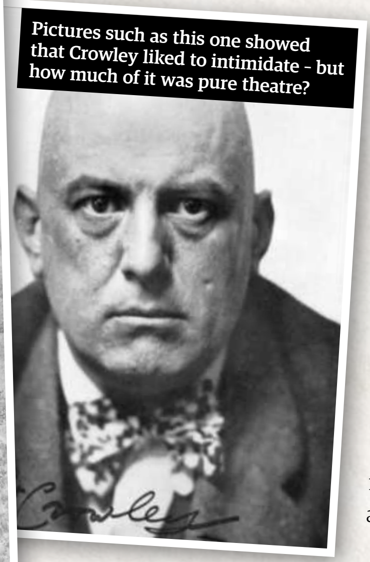
From now on, Crowley appeared at regular intervals in the popular press, with readers perceiving him as somewhere between a credible sorcerer and a clown. By 1914 he was broke, and sold Boleskine House to move to New York, where he worked as a double agent for the British government with great efficacy - even persuading a German spy called Sylvester Viereck to give him a job on his newspaper, *The Fatherland*.

Thelema was always Crowley's primary focus throughout the decades, and after leaving the USA in 1919, he returned to London, where he was attacked by a tabloid called *John Bull*. Accused of being a traitor in its pages, Crowley chose not to sue the newspaper, although his status as an intelligence officer was by now common knowledge. He had bigger things on his mind - not least an addiction to heroin, which had been prescribed to treat his asthma.

Moving away from the toxic environment of London, he relocated to Cefalù on Sicily, Italy, to found the Abbey of Thelema in a rented villa with


As this classic Crowley image indicates, he liked to cultivate a sinister image. The reality was somewhat different


Ass no questions: Crowley (and donkey) pictured on the former's first trip to the Himalayas in 1905


Pictures such as this one showed that Crowley liked to intimidate - but how much of it was pure theatre?

Defining moment

Crowley turns to the occult 1897

While at Cambridge, Crowley lives a dissipated life, exploring sexual liaisons with male and female partners. He also becomes an expert mountain climber, travelling to the Alps with his friend Oscar Eckenstein and making the first unguided ascent of the Mönch peak. However, a previous - and undefined - mystical experience that he underwent in Stockholm in 1896 had set him on an esoterically spiritual path, and after a trip to Russia he suffers a short-lived period of illness. This leads Crowley to consider the reality of death and to dismiss all human endeavour as meaningless - and, although a diplomatic career is beckoning, he determines to pursue his burgeoning interest in occult matters.

Timeline

1875

Born in Leamington Spa, Warwickshire
Edward Alexander Crowley is born as the only child of Edward and Emily Crowley. His parents are members of the Exclusive Brethren, a Christian fundamentalist group.
12 October 1875

1887

Death of Crowley's father
The senior Edward Crowley dies in 1887 of tongue cancer when his son is only 11. Crowley later defines this moment as a turning point in his life, not least because he inherits a large fortune.
1887

1895

Changes name to Aleister
Dissatisfied with the name Edward, Crowley adopts the name Aleister and goes up to Trinity College, Cambridge, to study philosophy. Later he switches to English literature.
1895

1898

Order of the Golden Dawn
Crowley is initiated into the Outer Order of the Golden Dawn by the Order's leader, Samuel Mathers, later Crowley's close associate. He quickly progresses through the organisation's ranks.
18 November 1898

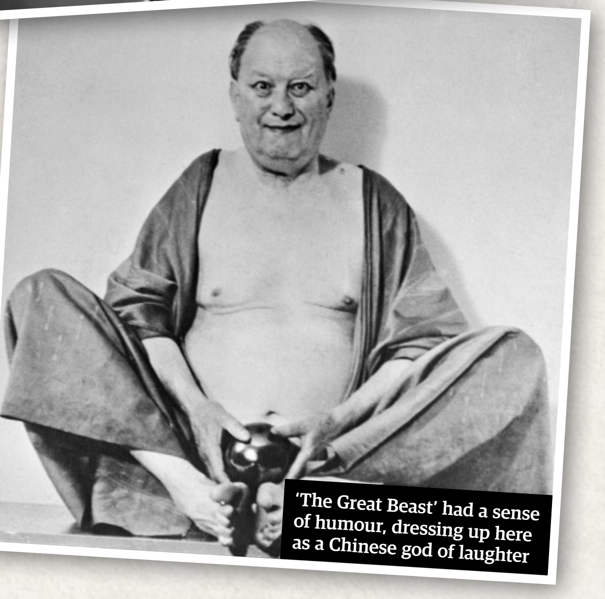
1899

Move to Boleskine House
Crowley styles himself as the 'laird of Boleskine' after buying this imposing property on Loch Ness. The house becomes infamous and is purchased in 1970 by Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page.
1899

1900

A spiritual journey
Having visited Mexico, the USA, Japan, Hong Kong and Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), Crowley studies the Hindu practice of raja yoga. He claims to have achieved dhyana, or a state of perfect awareness.
1900

Crowley and his second wife, Maria de Miramar, around 1930. The couple married to enable Maria to enter Britain


'The Great Beast' had a sense of humour, dressing up here as a Chinese god of laughter

like-minded Thelemites. A haven for sex magic and A∴A∴ rituals, the Abbey soon attracted a community of occult-obsessed individuals. For the four years of its existence, Crowley lived the contented, righteous life of a religious leader.

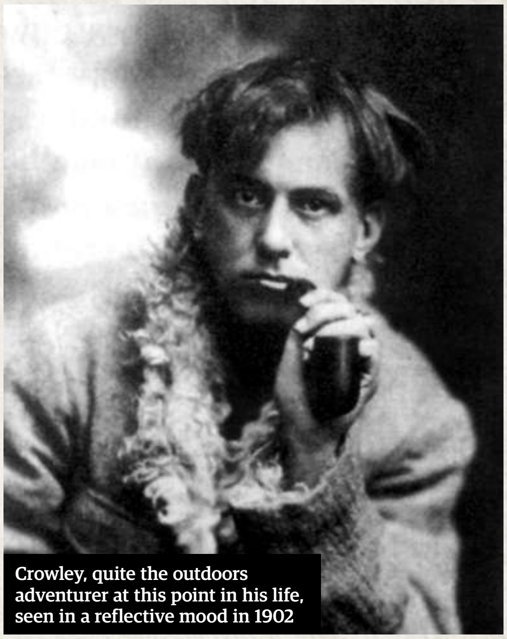
However, this came to an end when Benito Mussolini's fascist government heard inaccurate rumours of the goings-on at the Abbey and deported Crowley. A Thelemite by the name of Raoul Loveday had died after drinking polluted water; this was translated in *John Bull* as blood sacrifices and other scandalous activities. It was at this point that the paper labelled Crowley "the wickedest man in the world".

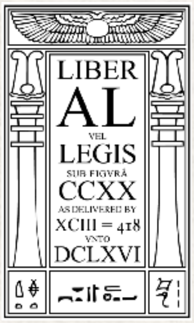
For all intents and purposes, that was the end of Crowley's life as a social pioneer. He lived out the rest of his days destitute and in poor health, although he was a prolific writer right up until the end. He was declared bankrupt in 1935, and then fathered a son, Randall Gair with a debutante named Deirdre Doherty, nicknaming the boy Aleister Atatürk. When World War II broke out two years later, Crowley was turned down by the Naval Intelligence Division when he offered them his services as a spy.

Crowley ended his days at a boarding house named Netherwood in Hastings, Sussex, where he spent his time appointing successors to the OTO and the A∴A∴. He died of chronic bronchitis, aggravated by pleurisy and myocardial degeneration, on 1 December 1947, aged 72 - actually a reasonable lifespan for someone beset by childhood illness and drug addictions in adulthood.

In some ways, Crowley had the last laugh. His funeral in Brighton was reported to be an unholy Black Mass by the tabloids, although it was no such thing, and his books continue to be popular even today. Thelemic principles still populate modern movements such as Wicca, while in America, the Church of Satan - popular in the heavy metal world and among atheists - bases its credo more or less exactly on 'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law'.

However, by the standards of Crowley, a shameless self-publicist, the fact that we're still talking about him and his philosophy seven decades after his death definitely represents nothing less than victory. His continuing influence on the occult, on magical practices and on popular culture as a whole still looms large.


Crowley, quite the outdoors adventurer at this point in his life, seen in a reflective mood in 1902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Defining moment

The Book of the Law 8 April 1904

While in Cairo, where he and his wife Rose invoke ancient Egyptian deities and study Islamic mysticism, Crowley hears a disembodied voice, delivering messages to him over a period of three days. The voice claims to be Aiwass, the messenger of Horus, also known as Hoor-Paar-Kraat. Crowley writes down these messages and collates them into his book *Liber AL vel Legis*, or *The Book of the Law*. In this volume he writes that the human race is poised to enter a new aeon of existence and that its prophet, unsurprisingly, is Crowley himself. His infamous slogan of 'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law' is introduced here, and the book becomes the basis of his new religion - Thelema.

TELEMA
BEY ZONE

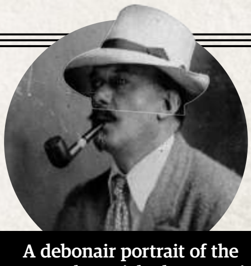
Defining moment

The Abbey of Thelema 1920

Moving to Cefalù in Sicily, Crowley rents a villa and names it the Abbey of Thelema. He later describes this period as one of perfect happiness, with each day devoted to rituals to Egyptian deities, masses, art, writing books and bringing up his acolytes' children. Sex magic and other arcane practices evolve, and Crowley develops addictions to heroin and cocaine. A film star, Jane Wolfe, becomes a Thelemite, and thinkers of all types congregate at the Abbey. However, a series of scandals resulting from the death of a Thelemite, Raoul Loveday, and the publication of Crowley's book *Diary of a Drug Fiend* eventually lead to his deportation from Italy and the closure of the Abbey.

1905

● **Death on the mountain**
Crowley attempts to climb Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas, but his team is fractured by disagreement and the other climbers abandon the ascent; they die in an accident for which Crowley is blamed.
1905


A debonair portrait of the soon-to-be "wickedest man in the world", taken around 1905

1907

● **Formation of the A∴A∴**
Breaking away from the Order of the Golden Dawn, Crowley co-founds the A∴A∴, whose philosophy is a syncretic blend of many schools of thought. Its magazine is called *The Equinox*.
November 1907

1930

● **Fake death of Crowley**
After a move to Berlin and then to Lisbon, Crowley fakes his own death. However, this doesn't stop him continuing his artistic, occult and sexual adventures across Europe.
April 1930

1947

● **Real death of Crowley**
Crowley succumbs to chronic bronchitis, exacerbated by lung and heart disease, at the age of 72, a relatively old age for a man of his lifestyle. His funeral is inaccurately labelled a Black Mass by the tabloids.
1 December 1947

© Getty, Creative Commons; Erik Albers, Elisa.rolle

The esoteric influence of Dion Fortune

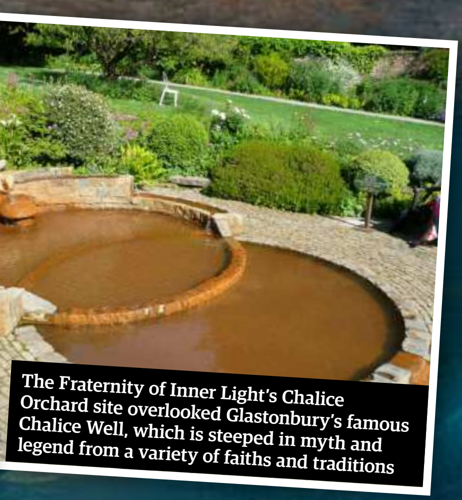
One 20th century woman had a huge impact on both the practice of ceremonial magic and the founding tenets of Wicca

Written by April Madden

In early 1895, a little girl named Violet had a dream. It was of a mountainous island-city of the ancient world, encircled with palaces and soaring, lofty towers that were inhabited by wise, powerful sorcerer-priests and priestesses whose rich ceremonial robes glimmered with arcane symbols. It was beautiful, life changing and all very removed from the ordinary middle-class street in Llandudno, Wales, where her family had their home. Nonetheless, that dream would stay with her for the rest of her life, and more would follow. She believed them to be visions of her past life in the fabled lost city of Atlantis.

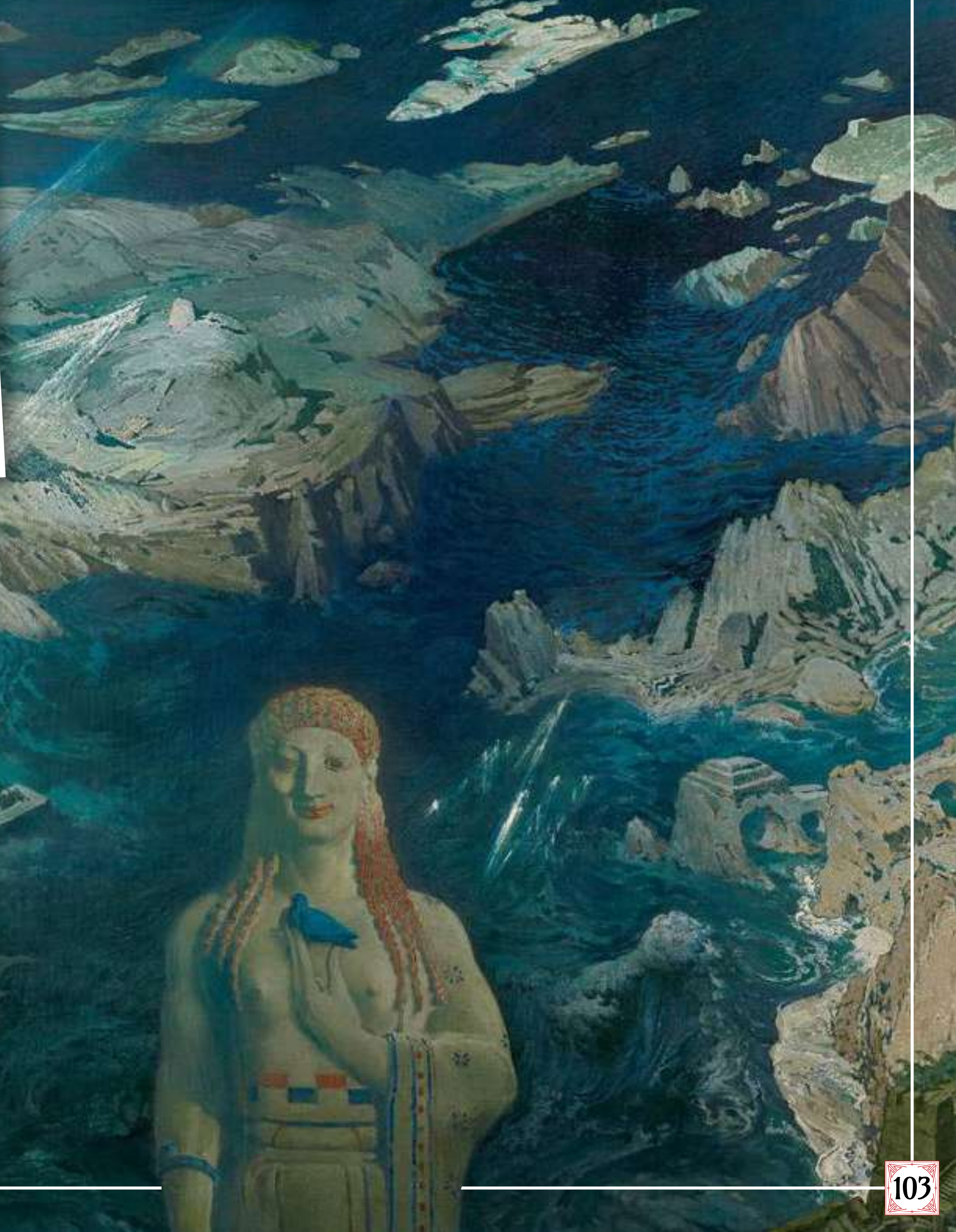
Violet's was a nouveau riche manufacturing family; they had little interest in investing in a classical education for their daughter, although she was a talented writer who had authored her first two books of poetry by her mid teens. By the age of 21 she had been packed off to a Warwickshire agricultural college that apparently also specialised in helping young women with psychological problems. Excelling there – she had a particular knack with chickens – she became a member of staff two years later, in 1913. But she was also bullied by the college warder and experienced a breakdown. Profoundly affected by her experience, she moved to London and began to study psychology. She worked as a counsellor, mainly advising women of her own social class, but had other clients too, notably a young WWI soldier suffering traumatic symptoms after his experiences on the Western Front. Trying to help this patient would introduce her to another world entirely.

She already had the germ of an interest in the occult, attending lunchtime lectures at the Theosophical Society. Here, she met an Irishman named Dr Theodore Moriarty, a Freemason with interests in anthropology and philosophy. Moriarty thought that Violet's patient was experiencing psychological attacks from a soul that had attached itself to him as a kind of 'etheric vampire'. Moriarty performed an exorcism, and the soldier's health apparently improved. From this point on, Violet believed that there was true power in the occult, particularly in ceremonial magic. She joined an order called Alpha et Omega, an offshoot of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, that a family



The Fraternity of Inner Light's Chalice Orchard site overlooked Glastonbury's famous Chalice Well, which is steeped in myth and legend from a variety of faiths and traditions

The former headquarters of Dion Fortune's Fraternity of Inner Light in Queensborough Terrace, Bayswater, London. The society was headquartered there from 1924



Dion Fortune was influenced by the myth of Atlantis, believing that she'd experienced visions of her past life in the ancient utopian city since she was four years old

friend introduced her to. Later, stationed in Bishop's Stortford as part of her war work researching soybeans for Britain's Food Production Department, she also joined a commune of Moriarty's Atlantis-obsessed followers based in the Hertfordshire town, and began immersing herself in mystical experiences. But it was becoming apparent that 'Violet' was a rather mundane name for an adventurer in the millennia-old mysteries of the cosmos. Something more sorcerous-sounding would be more appropriate. She had always liked the sound of the family motto, invented by her grandfather: 'Deo, non Fortuna' ('God, not luck'), so that's what she adopted. By 1921, Violet Mary Firth had been reborn as Dion Fortune.

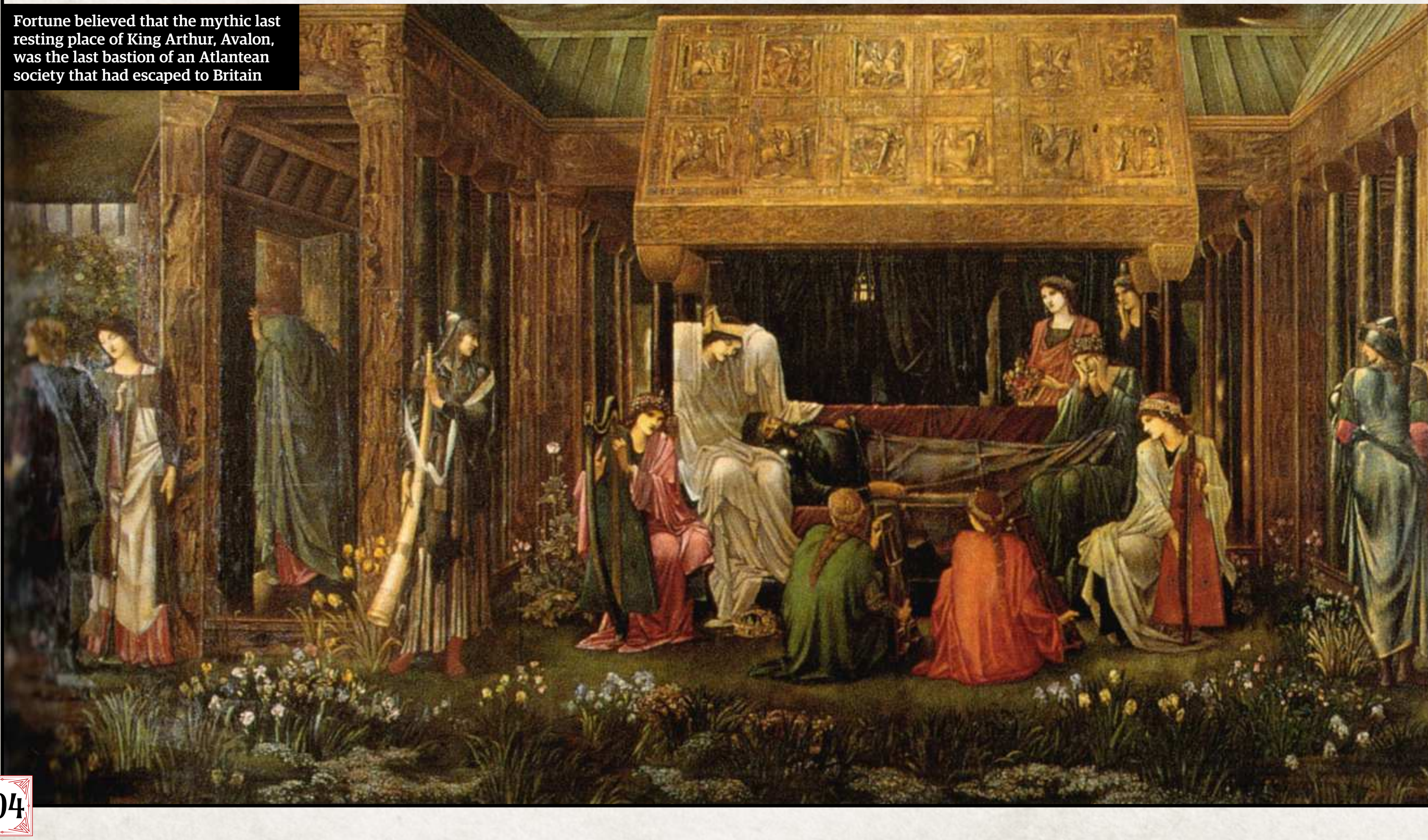
"By 1921, Violet Mary Firth had been reborn as Dion Fortune"

Believers in Atlantis at the time thought that it had been a highly advanced classical civilisation that used magic

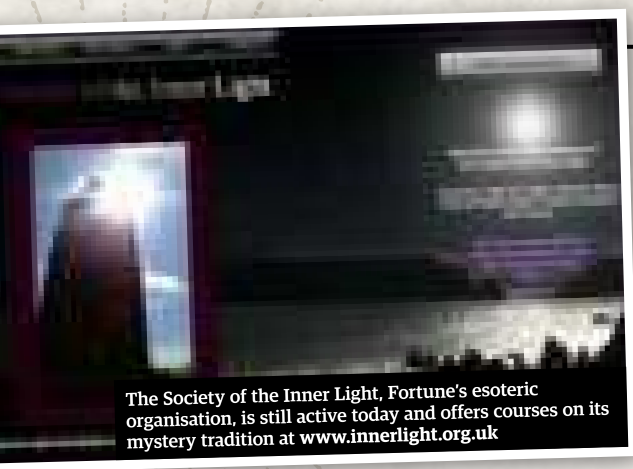
Fortune's mother had been a member of the Christian Science movement; trance mediumship had been a part of her life for as long as she could remember, and at this point she embraced it wholeheartedly. Unlike many other practitioners of magic at the time, Fortune still strongly identified as a Christian (her brief but highly influential flirtation with pagan imagery would come later). She believed that Jesus Christ was a member of a spiritual council of 'Ascended Masters' who revealed great truths to humanity through the practice of meditation and ritual magic. Her personal belief system synthesised elements of Moriarty's Masonically-inflected Atlantean mysticism, the Golden Dawn's ceremonies, and the altered states of Christian Science mediumship. She founded an order called the Community (later the Fraternity; now the Society) of the Inner Light, and began to publish articles and essays on her philosophy. At this point, Alpha et Omega leader Moina Mathers unceremoniously ejected Fortune from the Golden Dawn spin-off. Fortune later claimed that Mathers physically and psychically attacked her using both real and spirit cats.

Fortune soon rejected the Theosophical Society as well, claiming that it focused too much on Indian and Tibetan teachings and not on the Celtic and European traditions she found more appropriate to her ways of thinking. But by this point her own society was gaining influence; it had what it called a 'temple' in Bayswater, London, and a country retreat in Glastonbury, Somerset, known as the Chalice Orchard. Fortune was profoundly influenced by the theory that King Arthur's England had been the last remnant of Atlantean society; the Arthurian mystique that today clings to Glastonbury Tor and its surrounding area (often alleged to be the Vale of Avalon of Brythonic myth) was not her invention, but Fortune certainly did a lot to fuel the idea's popular adoption. She was a great storyteller, and her notion of a post-Atlantis Avalon on the Somerset Levels was beguiling.

Fortune published her first occult novel, *The Demon Lover*, in 1927, and although her how-to textbooks such as *The Esoteric Orders And Their Work* (1928), *The Training Of An Initiate*, and *Psychic Self Defence* (both 1930) were popular and well received during her lifetime and have been influential since, it's Fortune's fiction that perhaps had the biggest impact on subsequent magical thought and practices. Many novices in Wicca and other traditions often find one or more of Fortune's novels on their recommended reading list: they offer a balance between an entertaining, plot-driven romantic thriller and an approachable, thinly veiled



Fortune believed that the mythic last resting place of King Arthur, Avalon, was the last bastion of an Atlantean society that had escaped to Britain



The Society of the Inner Light, Fortune's esoteric organisation, is still active today and offers courses on its mystery tradition at www.innerlight.org.uk

allegory for the principles of the 20th century's ideas about magic.

In the 1930s, the Christian Fortune, almost certainly influenced by Margaret Murray's witch-cult hypothesis (see p106), began to explore the notion of an ancient, pre-Christian European religion. At the same time she began to reject not Christianity itself, and certainly not her unique personal take on it, but the dogma of the church. She was particularly scathing about St Augustine and Paul the Apostle, describing them as "crusty old bachelors". Instead, she began to explore other belief systems, such as the pantheon of ancient Egypt. It's during this period that Fortune made her claim that "All the gods are one god, and all the goddesses one goddess", an idea that would become key to the tenets of Wicca - the phrase itself is even used in a variant of the invocation The Charge of the Goddess, used in the Wiccan ritual of Drawing Down the Moon.

Indeed, it could be said of Fortune's fiction that "all the novels are one novel", because they typically all follow the same theme. The main character is an empowered woman, often already a priestess of a secret and esoteric tradition. She meets a man who is struggling with physical or mental health issues, or searching for something. Together they achieve their interlaced goals; both require the other as part of some mystical initiatory experience that allows them to maximise their true spiritual potential. In *The Goat-Foot God*, clearly influenced by the witch-cult hypothesis, the main characters are searching for the Greek god Pan; in *The Sea Priestess* they are tasked with building a temple to an ancient ocean goddess.

Some commentators have remarked on the repeated presence of two key female archetypes in these novels: the creative, seductive 'Earth Mother' and the pure, arcane 'Moon Mistress'; each symbolises a different kind of female power. Fortune's stated aim was to subconsciously educate her (presumably female) readers about specifically feminine spiritual practices while they enjoyed the high-key plots of her novels. More prosaically, Fortune's marriage to Welsh GP Tom Penry Evans (which she claimed to friends that she'd only undertaken for magical reasons) was collapsing; the imaginative and emotional Fortune may well have found comfort in her own romantic tales. Critics have noted too that the characters in Fortune's fiction conform to strict early 20th century gender roles; it's been theorised that this was her reaction to society's popular perception of occultists as permissive libertines, which was fuelled by a scandal within the Golden Dawn and by the antics of Aleister Crowley. Indeed, the character of Hugo Astley in *The Winged Bull* is often considered to be a barely disguised analogue of Crowley, although the two were correspondents and, according to Crowley's assistant Kenneth Grant, got on very well when they met around 1942.

By the outbreak of World War II, Fortune was swinging towards Christian ideology again, perhaps as a reaction to Nazi Germany's fascination with the occult. She organised meditative groups focused on psychically aiding Britain's war effort, but the Fraternity's Bayswater temple was damaged in the Blitz, and paper shortages meant that her society magazine could no longer be published. Meanwhile, the embarrassed Fortune had been forced to grant her unfaithful husband a divorce, and had largely removed herself from public life. She embarked on another programme of mediumship, focusing on Arthurian myth as a keystone for British ritual practices, but she was tired and struggling, and unusually in 1945 she was unable to give her customary winter solstice address to the Fraternity of the Inner Light. She died of leukaemia shortly afterwards on 6 January 1946 at the age of 55.

Fortune's failings

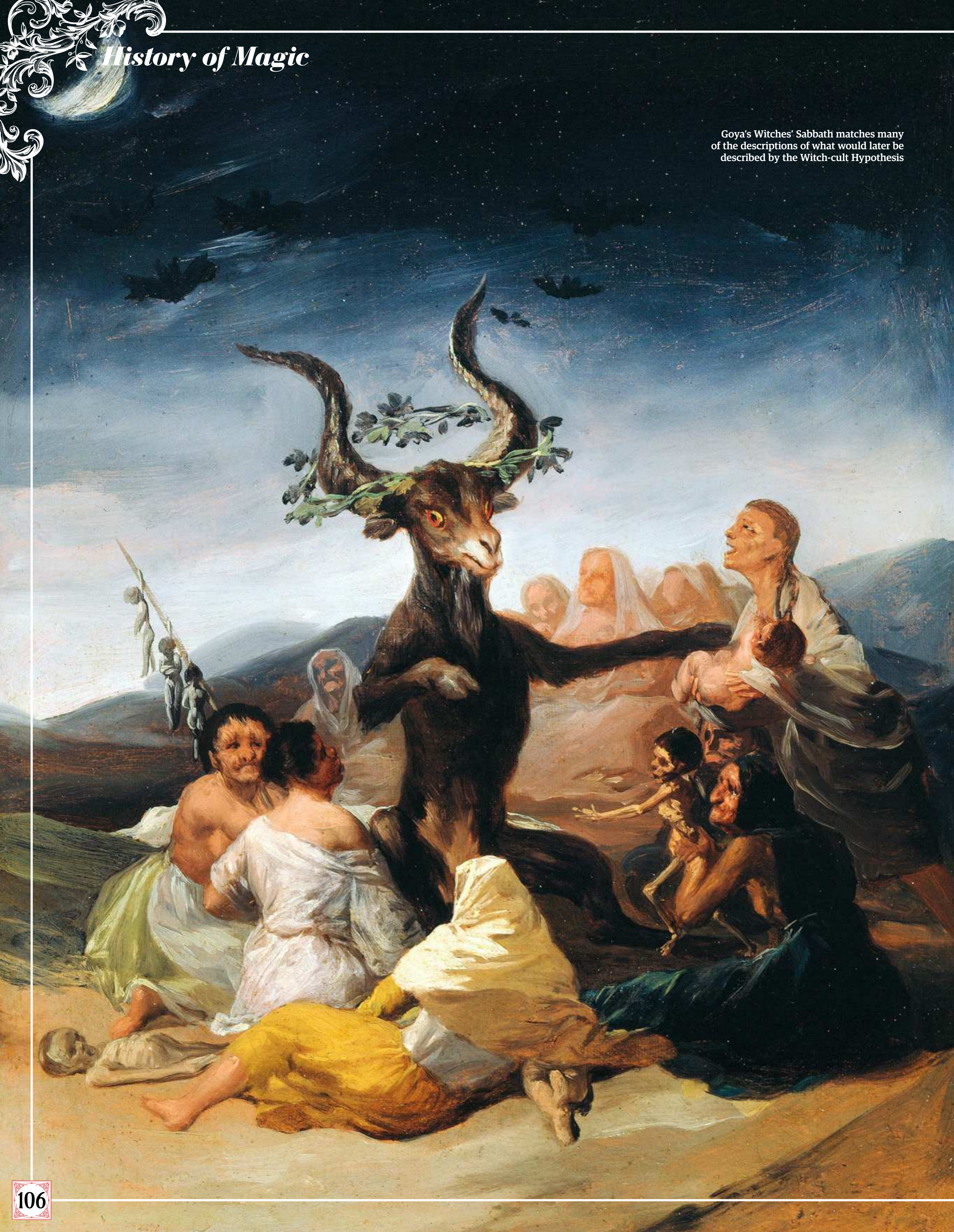
Dion Fortune was very much a product of her time, social class and place. She modestly conformed to her prescribed gender role and eschewed feminism, even though in her life and work she constantly demonstrated her personal belief that women were intellectually and emotionally equal to men. She didn't have the benefit of the classical education that male fellow occultists like Aleister Crowley had; as a result some of her theories about ancient religious and magical practices sometimes take wild imaginative leaps of faith instead of considered, scholarly suggestions.

And as an upper-middle-class white British woman of the early 20th century, she had ideas about race that make uncomfortable reading today. In particular, she believed that localised, indigenous myth-forms were most suited to the race that had created and preserved them; other peoples could study them from a distance but not share in their practice. She opposed the inclusion of Eastern practices such as yoga in Western Esoteric thought and practice, and thought that non-white people shouldn't practice Western Esoteric traditions.

Today we would view Fortune's attitudes as racist, and the social ideologies of her era are certainly problematic. However, because Fortune was exclusionary of traditions outside those she considered her own, her ceremonial rites didn't suffer from the syncretism that was so popular in 1960s and '70s magical practice. This grab-bag approach saw many practitioners adopt ideas and rituals from African, Caribbean and Native American traditions, and is now raising uncomfortable but entirely valid questions about cultural appropriation.

One of very few verified photos of Fortune in existence, this was probably taken around the time the teenage Violet Firth published her first book of poetry, entitled *Violets*

© Creative Commons; Ethan Doyle White



Goya's Witches' Sabbath matches many of the descriptions of what would later be described by the Witch-cult Hypothesis

The ancient witch religion

Before the coming of Christianity, was there a pagan religion that tied Europe together? And has it survived in an unbroken line to this day?

Written by Ben Gazur

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s entry for witchcraft in the 1929 edition must have surprised many readers of the time. In it the author boldly asserts that,

"When examining the records of the mediaeval [sic] witches, we are dealing with the remains of a pagan religion which survived, in England at least, till the 18th century."

It goes on to describe how followers of this old religion can still be found in France and Italy. Despite the best efforts of the church this religion flourished for centuries. In fact, many priests "were only outwardly Christian and carried on the ancient rites." The encyclopedia termed this movement 'The Witch-cult'.

Through all editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* until the 1960s, this authoritative definition of witchcraft remained in place. It influenced not only the casual reader's view of the history of witchcraft but also played a role in shaping popular books and movies for a generation. Yet today most scholars reject the idea of a pan-European religion of witches.

What was this witch-cult that was apparently so widespread? To look into this we must explore the life and opinions of the author of the entry on witchcraft and the evidence they found for a pan-European pagan belief system.

The greatest proponent of the witch-cult hypothesis was the undoubtedly brilliant and redoubtable Margaret Murray, and it was she who wrote the above statements for the encyclopedia. Others like Karl Ernst Jarke in 1828 had proposed theories that witches were, in fact, followers of a pagan religion, but Murray was the first to fully explore the idea. In the course of her long life (her autobiography, published in 1963, was optimistically titled *My First Hundred Years*) she was an accomplished archaeologist, historian, folklorist, and Egyptologist. She became the first female archaeologist to teach at a British university, but her research could not be contained in any one area. Even as a child Murray had taken note of the rhymes and folklore told by the old people who lived nearby. Her interest in folklore became more focused when she spent time in Glastonbury and began to ponder the legends of the Holy Grail. She collected items related to witchcraft and even donated a bottle to the Ashmolean Museum that was said to contain a trapped witch inside it.

In 1917 Murray presented a paper called 'Organisations of Witches in Great Britain.' This marked the beginning of the witch-cult hypothesis. As Murray remarked,

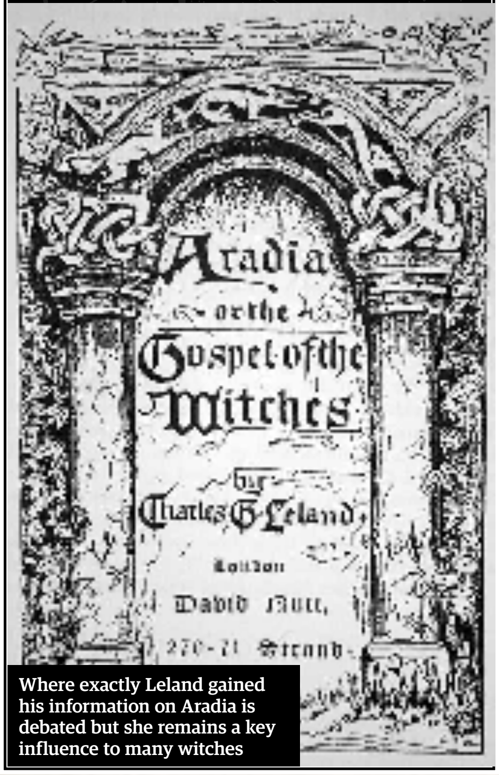
Murray's witch bottle was recently displayed at the Ashmolean Museum's Spellbound exhibition about magic

Aradia, the witch messiah

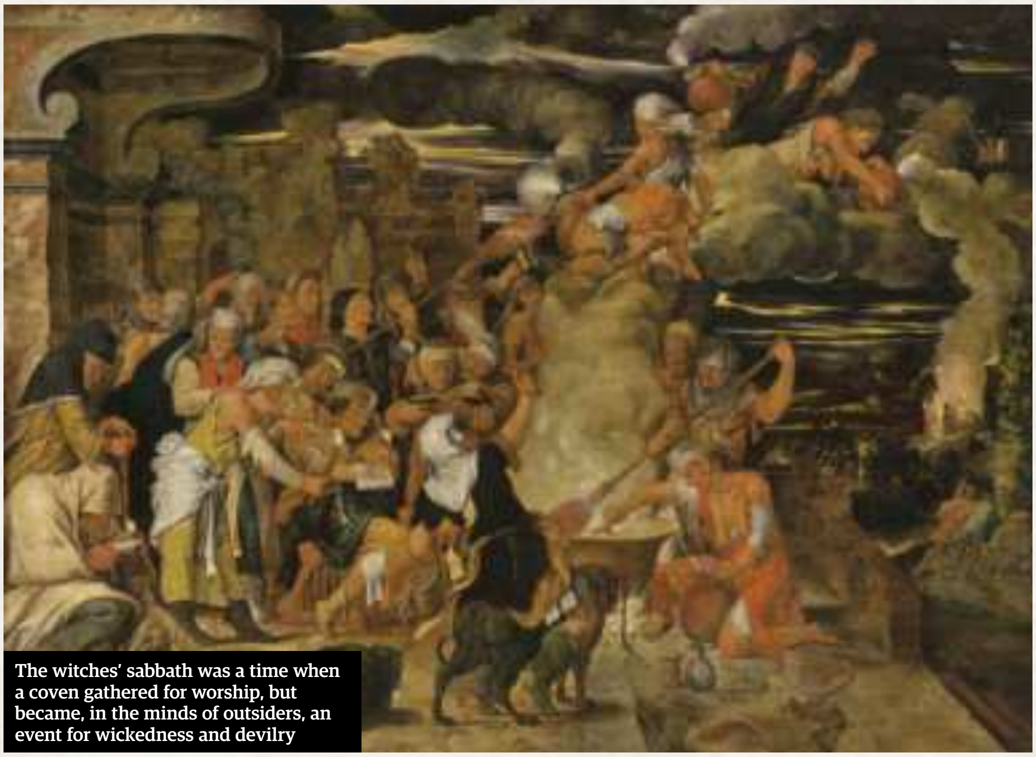
Charles Leland was convinced that an ancient religion of witches existed. From this belief he concluded that there may well be a holy scripture used by them, and set out to find it. Published in 1899, *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches*, is the result of his research.

The prose and poems of the book describe how the goddess Diana was impregnated by her brother, the light-bringer Lucifer. When Diana gives birth to a girl she names her Aradia. Aradia is given the task of teaching witches how to protect the weak against the strong. Aradia then departs, but calls her witches to gather naked each Full Moon in the forest to celebrate with a consecrated meal called the Sabbat. Back in the heavens with her mother, Aradia can still be called on to use her powers.

The text of Leland's *Aradia* covers more of the legends associated with Diana but also describes practical magic. Should you want to have a good vintage of wine, it tells you how to pray to the goddess. If it is love you want, then there is a spell for that. Aradia is now a central figure in many Wiccan sects.


Aradia
or the
Gospel of the
Witches
by
Charles G. Leland
London
David Nutt,
270-71 Strand

Where exactly Leland gained his information on Aradia is debated but she remains a key influence to many witches


The witches' sabbath was a time when a coven gathered for worship, but became, in the minds of outsiders, an event for wickedness and devilry

until that point witch rituals and cults had not been subjected to scientific study. Over 31 pages of immaculately sourced research, Murray did exactly that. This paper was followed up by several books that further explored the witch-cult: *The Witch-cult in Western Europe*, *The God of the Witches*, and *The Divine King in England*. Her findings were startling to some, but utterly bewitching to others.

Murray's description of the witch-cult is vivid and fascinating. She never argues that magic is objectively real but instead studies the beliefs held by witches themselves, in just the same way an anthropologist may study the belief system of any other faith: as an example of belief, without questioning its reality, veracity, or lack thereof.

Murray believed that by studying ancient myths, legends, and historical records, a conserved set of rituals found in many countries and many times could be discerned. These existed as a religion followed by many people, but with the spread of Christianity, the older pagan ways had to be suppressed. At first it was only kings and lords who converted, leaving the majority of people still following the old faith. In many early texts produced by the church, references to devilry and magic can be found that show how they tried to eradicate the religion of the witches.

A 7th century Archbishop of Canterbury had to issue a decree against anyone who:

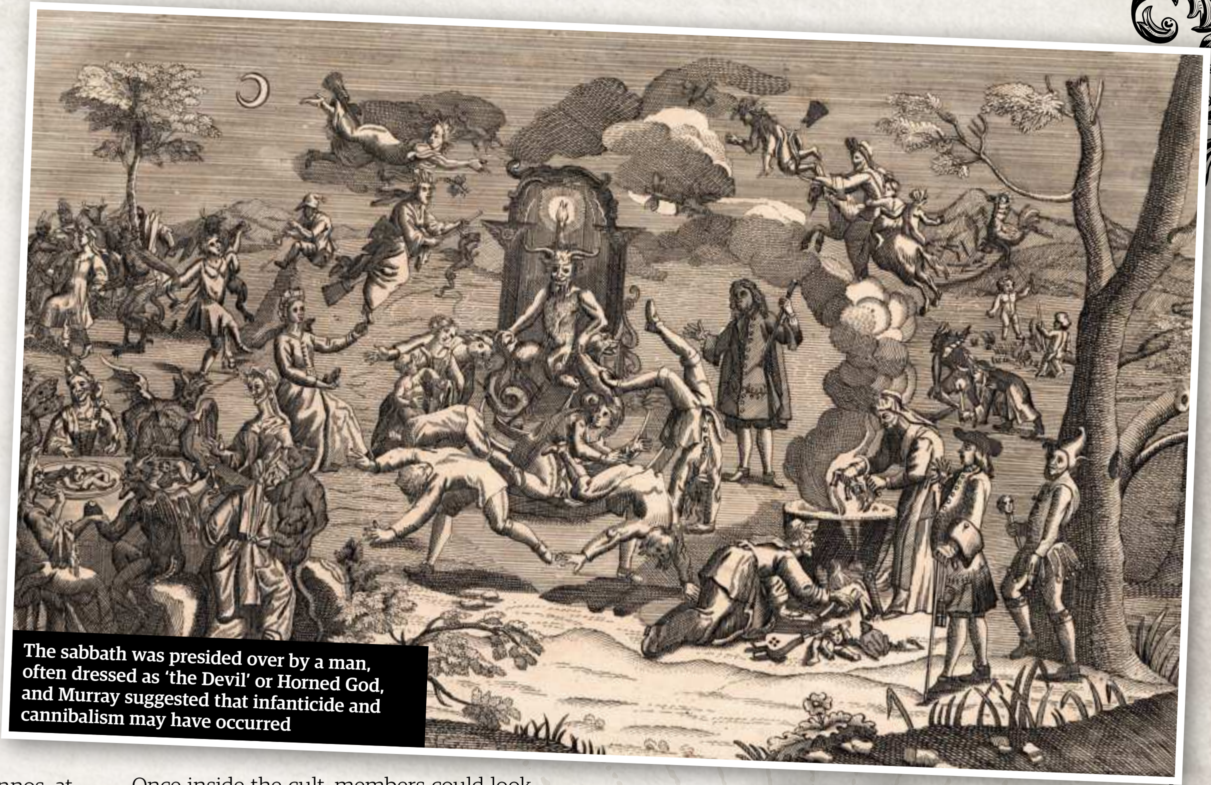
> *"...goes about as a stag or a bull; that is, making himself into a wild animal, and dressing in the skin of a herd animal, and putting on the heads of beasts; those who in such wise transform themselves into the appearance of a wild animal, penance for three years; because this is devilish."*

From sources such as these Murray was able to reconstruct what she believed were the inner workings of the witch-cult. Each coven of exactly 13 members (a devil's dozen) was led by a master, often called 'the Devil' by Christian investigators. This person was considered a god incarnate by the witches and had to be obeyed in all things. He also had the task of instructing his witches in the performance of magic and rituals.

Murray was not concerned in her works with operative magic - casting spells and curses - she instead studied ritual magic; the beliefs and actions that underpinned the society of witches. It is this organisation of witches that was focused on the Devil, as she called the head of a coven.

The significance of the number 13 to magical practitioners is highly influenced by Margaret Murray's theories about it

"Murray's description of the witch-cult is vivid and fascinating"



The sabbath was presided over by a man, often dressed as 'the Devil' or Horned God, and Murray suggested that infanticide and cannibalism may have occurred

Indeed the witches themselves in their testimonies at trials always claimed it was 'the Devil' they were meeting. He - Murray concludes the leader of a coven was almost always male - would conduct the religious services observed on the witches' sabbath and often led his colleagues in fertility dances. Sometimes he would appear to his followers either dressed in the form of an animal or be represented at a sabbath by a real animal. Sometimes the witches would know the true identity of their master, but sometimes it might be a mystery as to who was leading them.

The god worshipped by the witches was a matter of dispute. Sometimes it was a two-faced deity called Janus or Dianus, who was one of the earliest gods known to the Romans. Murray sometimes refers to the witch-cult as the Dianic cult in honour of their god. In later work Murray posits a Horned God, perhaps Pan or Cernunnos, at the centre of witch worship. All manner of horned creatures can be seen as its manifestations. The Minotaur, Herne the Hunter, and Naigamesha all show its hallmarks. Headdresses made from the skulls and antlers of deer have been found that are approximately 11,000 years old and may well represent objects used in religious rites. If outsiders glimpsed a man dressed as this Horned God it is easy to see how witches could have been interpreted as literal devil worshippers.

The Devil who presided over the coven could be a harsh master. Absence from a sabbath could lead to a whipping or beating with an iron rod. Several witches' confessions refer to the Devil bearing this iron rod and using it when people tried to quit the cult. Those who attempted to reveal the secrets of the witches were put to death. As the Roman Catholic church would often call for the death of all witches, it is not hard to see why a witch-cult might want to remain a private and anonymous club.

Those who were born to members of the witch-cult were introduced to it at a very young age, as soon as they could talk. Those seeking to convert from Christianity were first forced to renounce their baptism. They then placed one hand on the head and one on the foot and swore that all that was between would be devoted to the god of the witches. People joining the cult were often given a witches' mark somewhere on their body to confirm their membership.

Murray theorised that folkloric traditions like Dorset's Horned Ooser were survivals from the witch-cult

Once inside the cult, members could look forward to regular meetings with the Devil, which featured sermons and instruction. Cotton Mather, the Puritan American minister, said "The witches are organized like Congregational Churches." The similarity of the organisation of witches to a church was taken by Christians as a mockery of their own rites. As well as sabbaths, there were also four annual grand celebrations. These great feasts featured all-night dancing and feasting and certain other, unmentionable, obscene rites.

Perhaps the most offensive charge hurled at the witches was that they sacrificed and consumed the flesh of babies. In a 1918 paper Murray considered the evidence for child sacrifice. She found that babies, often unbaptised newborns, were sometimes taken by witches for special services. Here the babies would be killed, often by inserting a needle in the brain, and the flesh prepared for consumption. One way of ensuring witches never confessed was to feed them the tongue of a baby - this way the witch's own tongue would be as powerless as a baby's to reveal their secrets. Later, in *The God of the Witches*, Murray dialled back her discussions of child sacrifice and dark magic to make the witch-cult seem more palatable.

Margaret Murray championed the idea of a long-lasting religion of the witches and made it one of the most popular theories about European witchcraft

Adults could also serve as sacrifices. Murray thought that the traditional stories of selling one's soul to the devil could be derived from witches buying the right to live for pleasure for seven years, if they are willing to die when those seven years are up. In *The Divine King in England*, Murray traces sacrifices tied to the kings of Britain from William the Conqueror to James I. These deaths range from the mysterious shooting of William II with an arrow to the murder of Thomas Becket, possibly at the King's command. She claimed other famous people may have served as voluntary sacrifices to the witch-cult, including Joan of Arc and early serial killer Gilles de Rais.

The Horned God

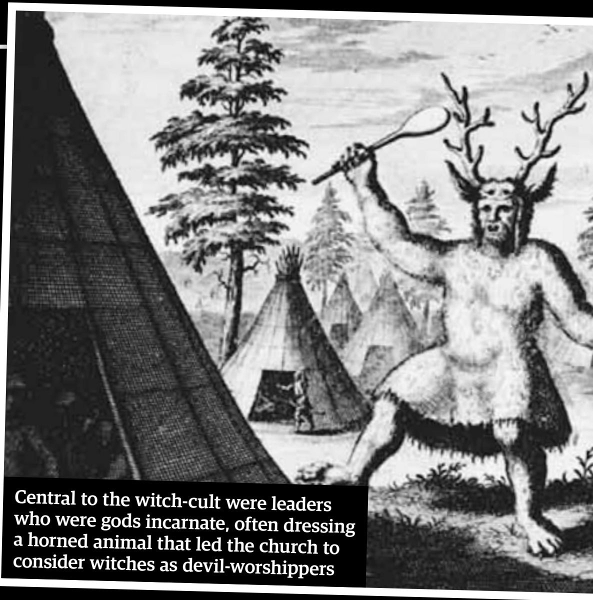
According to the witch-cult hypothesis the central figure of veneration was a Horned God representing fertility. At meetings the leader of a coven would embody the god and even dress up as the deity. One of the reasons that Christians were so hostile to witch-cults was because the god of the witches so much resembled the Christian idea of the devil.

Images of horned gods can be attested well into prehistory. In the Cave of the Trois-Freres in France around 13,000 BCE, someone sketched high on a wall the image of a man with an animal tail and the antlers of a deer. The discoverer of this picture called it 'The Sorcerer' and Margaret Murray thought it the earliest depiction of a deity on Earth. Today the Horned God is often called Cernunnos, after a Gallo-Roman sculpture from the 1st century CE was discovered with that name and the image of an antlered figure. In Wiccan belief, the Horned God can represent the masculine, but also animals and the vital forces of the wild. Some consider him the god who carries the souls of the dead to the afterlife. He is often paired with the Goddess as one of two chief gods.

Thus a whole religion can be traced from the horned figures painted on cave walls in the Neolithic age to the early modern world before Christianity finally triumphed and eradicated the witch-cult. Yet even then there were those who would not let it die.

Margaret Murray's work was influenced by the anthropological studies of George Frazer as published in *The Golden Bough*. In that book Frazer compared religions and folklore from around the world in an attempt to find commonalities. He developed the theory that many myths in many places can be traced back to fertility rites and that many depended on the sacrifice (often symbolic) of a king or god who would later rise again.

Frazer took the title of his book from a painting by Turner, also called 'The Golden Bough', which showed a scene from the *Aeneid* where a golden branch is offered to Hades to allow Aeneas to pass into the underworld. Just as Aeneas would return from death, so too would the god of the fertility cults. He would die at the harvest, as crops do, but return to life in the spring.


Central to the witch-cult were leaders who were gods incarnate, often dressing a horned animal that led the church to consider witches as devil-worshippers

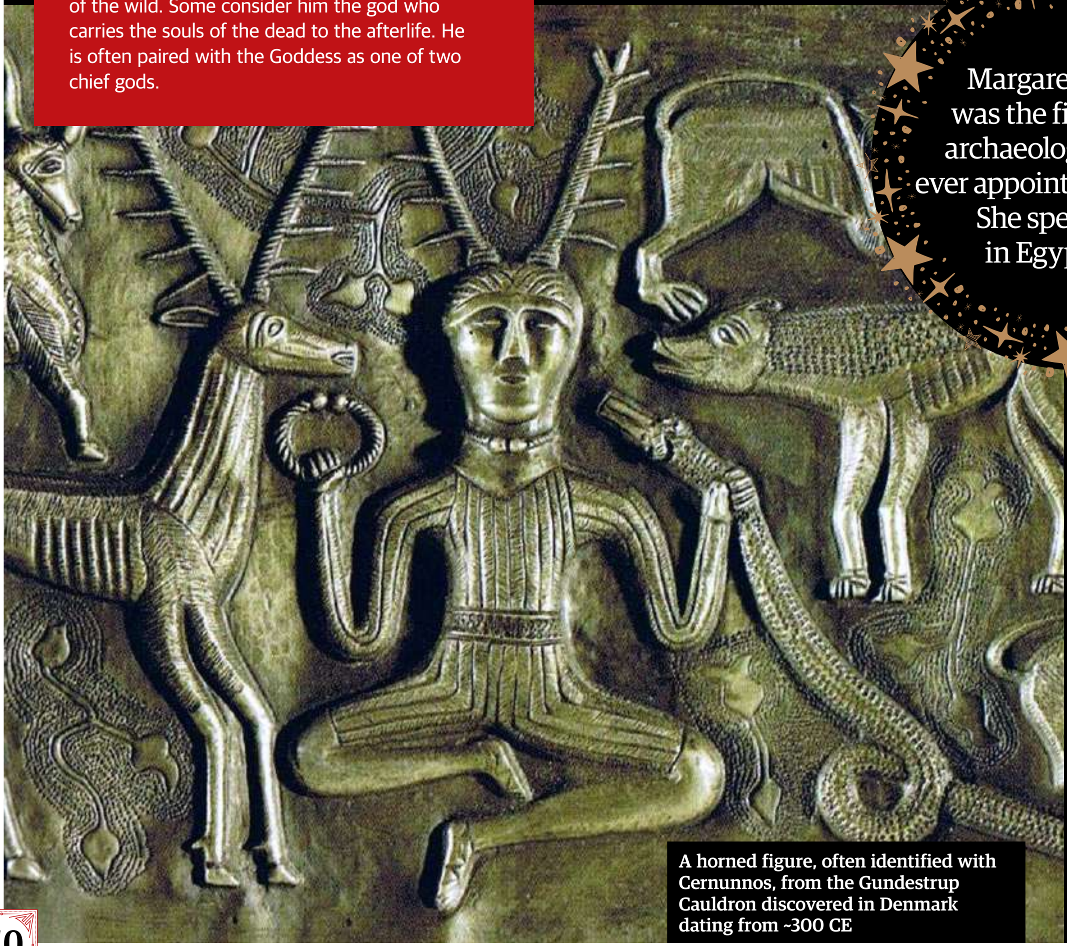
That Frazer found echoes of these fertility rites and beliefs in many cultures obviously strengthened Margaret Murray's thesis of a widespread witch-cult. Nor was the witch-cult hypothesis the first sympathetic reassessment of witchcraft. *La Sorcière* by Jules Michelet recast the victims of the Witch Trials as women rebelling against the brutalities of life under feudalism and the church. They were desperate people turning to sorcery in search of the wealth and power that was denied to them by their social betters. They were not themselves heirs to an ancient cult but they took inspiration from folklore and myth.

Charles Leland claimed to have discovered that societies of witches still existed and followed what he called the Old Religion. *Aradia*, published in 1899, is the result of his search for a 'gospel' of that faith. Many of the beliefs attested in it, such as witches' meetings called 'sabbats', would later be found in Margaret Murray's witch-cult hypothesis.

Margaret Murray was the first female archaeology lecturer ever appointed in the UK. She specialised in Egyptology

The grounds for proposing a witch-cult had already been set out, but it was Murray's scholarship that gave it greater credence. As soon as it was published it met a very willing audience. Thanks to its success, Murray was given the job of producing the entry on witchcraft for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1929, introducing her witch-cult theory to even more people. It was an attractive theory to both sceptics who denied that witchcraft was real and to believers who saw magic as part of their heritage.

Among believers was the author Robert Graves. In his book *The White Goddess* he argued for the existence of mainly matriarchal societies in prehistory that worshipped a female deity. He gathered evidence from many cultures but insisted that the truth could only be viewed by those with a poetic mind. Indeed his whole work only makes sense if one uses poetic logic and accepts many 'if-then' arguments. Graves further publicised his theory in his often-idiosyncratic retellings of


A horned figure, often identified with Cernunnos, from the Gundestrup Cauldron discovered in Denmark dating from ~300 CE

the Greek myths and a novel, *Seven Days in New Crete*, which imagined a world where worship of the goddess was widespread. In his works he reconstructed a Celtic tree goddess called Druantia (derived from the Gaelic word for 'oak'; the word 'druid' shares the same root) who has since been adopted by neopagans as a fertility deity.

Graves was not the only person influenced by the witch-cult hypothesis who has helped shape modern beliefs. Gerald Gardner was one of the most influential voices in modern Wicca. A keen follower of the witch-cult hypothesis, he thought the underlying religion had long ago died out, until he apparently discovered a surviving coven practising in southern England's New Forest. Using the knowledge he learned there, Gardner wrote many of the foundational texts of Wicca and helped to create several other covens. Gerald's influential book *Witchcraft Today* was published with an introduction by Margaret Murray.

Problems with the witch-cult and the other early studies of comparative anthropology soon emerged. Fieldwork and discussions with people living in the cultures Frazer had described showed he had often misunderstood their beliefs. As Margaret Murray said herself in the opening line of *The Witch-cult in Western Europe*, "The subject of Witches and Witchcraft has always suffered from the biassed opinions of the commentators." Many felt that she fell into her own trap and that the evidence used by Murray and Frazer was cherry-picked to fit their pre-conceived notions of what they thought they would find.

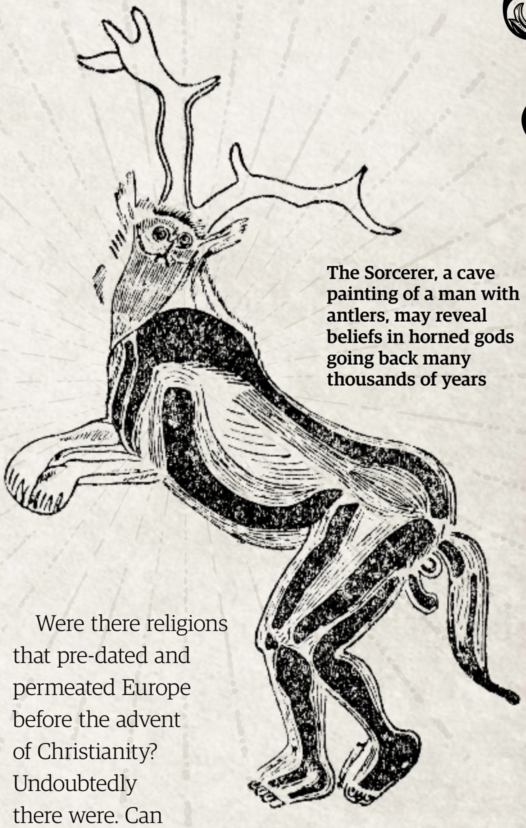
Historians found Murray's reliance on the testimonies given at witch trials troubling. That most of these confessions would have been given under duress does not feature in Murray's analysis. For her the witches speak nothing but the truth. Modern research shows how close questioning of a subject can get them to confirm almost anything an interrogator suggests.

Many scholars today question the conclusions Murray drew from her extensive research. Some of her findings, such as that 'the Devil' always wore a hat, are superficial and silly-sounding today. But she also believed that legends of fairies may have been a reference to a diminutive race of humans who once shared the land with modern humans and who may have passed some of their religion to the witches. Archaeological searches have been unable to confirm their existence, but Murray's academic position at University College London gave her theory a patina of respectability.

Some also find fault with Murray's affection for numerology. Any time the numbers 13 or seven could be found she took it as proof of the influence of the witch-cult. That the Order of the Garter originally had 26 members is evidence that King Edward III formed it on the basis of two covens (2 x 13). The opposite is also true in that sometimes the avoidance of the number 13 is held up as evidence of a conscious desire to rebel against the old religion. Of course, if you look closely at many numbers you will find them in some way derived from or related to 13 or seven.

Opinion is still split over Murray and her work, and later criticism often overshadows her initial academic reputation

Yet to attack the minutiae of the witch-cult hypothesis is perhaps to miss the important points raised by the theory and the longings that underpinned it. Murray was a supporter of women's suffrage who marched in several demonstrations. She may have been aware of the work of American suffragette Matilda Joslyn Gage, who thought of the persecution of the witches as nothing but an expression of the misogyny deeply entrenched in society. Others, female and male, would also find in the witch-cult ways to right the wrongs they perceived with the world.



The Sorcerer, a cave painting of a man with antlers, may reveal beliefs in horned gods going back many thousands of years

Were there religions that pre-dated and permeated Europe before the advent of Christianity? Undoubtedly there were. Can oral tradition preserve practices and traditions for centuries? We know this is true. Is it possible that a folk religion could have continued in some form? Absence of evidence is not always evidence of absence. All we can say for certain is that many today do still ascribe to the witch-cult hypothesis.

As the work of Murray and others has been incorporated into Wicca and other neopagan belief systems, we can see how powerful the idea is. Many Wiccans worship the Great Horned God and the Great Moon Goddess as described by the early followers of the witch-cult theory. Similarly the witches' sabbats are often still held. Ask a Wiccan or other kind of witch today and they will tell you they feel a powerful connection to an ancient tradition. Whether this is the religion suggested by Murray or the basic human need for belief may be up for debate, but the influence of the witch-cult hypothesis most certainly isn't.

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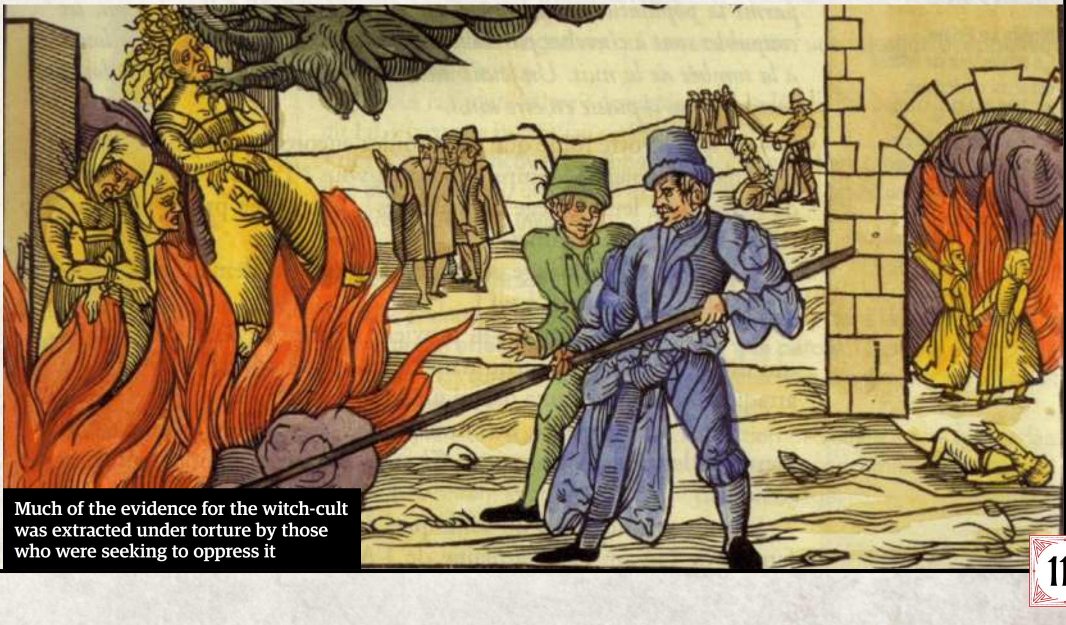


Much of the evidence for the witch-cult was extracted under torture by those who were seeking to oppress it

Gardner's genesis of Wicca

Utilising ancient and recent writings and commentary, Gerald Gardner brought Wicca into modern religious discourse during the mid-20th century and became its first media star

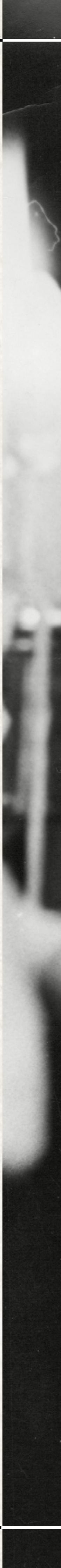
Written by Mike Haskew

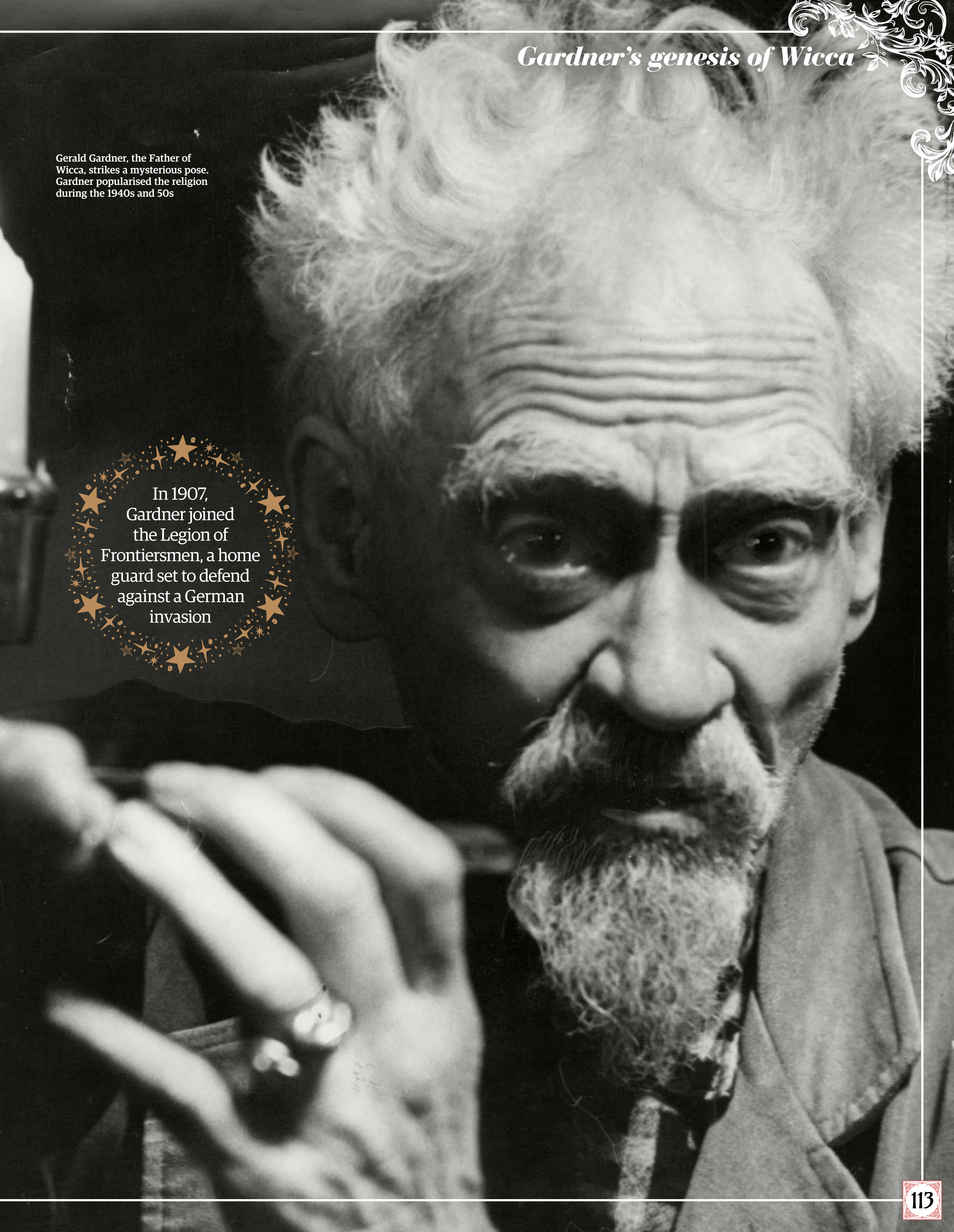
Modern Wicca traces its origins to the early 20th century and the research and practice of individuals drawn to mysticism and occultism who sought a connection to the religions of the ancient world, particularly those of northern and western Europe.

While debate as to the religion's true origin continues, modern Wicca was popularised during the 1940s and 50s, particularly in the writings and teachings of Gerald Gardner, a former British civil servant and adventurer who travelled widely during his lifetime. He was drawn to the exploration of pagan religions of Asia and Africa as well as the ways of the Druids and other practitioners. Wicca today includes followers who gather in covens, generally of up to 15 members, who practise witchcraft and the worship of nature. They revere a female deity, or Goddess, and other associated deities.

Wiccans generally see their religion as based in pre-Christian tradition, while it also includes elements of numerous ancient religions, drawn from many pre-existing traditions and interspersed with the esoteric writings of ancient and modern mystics. The religion includes ceremonial magic, tenets of Freemasonry, Spiritualism, Theosophy, and the religion of Thelema and its founder, the mystic Aleister Crowley. The foremost proponent of modern Wicca, indeed the "Father of Wicca", Gardner popularised the religion in the mid-20th century, particularly with the release of his *Book of Shadows*, a collection of the writings, spells and traditions of others brought together with some of Gardner's own thoughts and interpretations.

Gardner's journey through the world of mysticism was lifelong. Born in Blundellsands, Lancashire, England on 13 June 1884 to a wealthy family engaged in the timber trade, he grew up under the influence of his Irish nursemaid, Josephine 'Com' McCombie, and saw much more of her during his formative years than his own parents. He was a sickly boy, and his family financed moves with Com to the French Riviera, the Canary Islands, and the coast of Africa. Along the way, he developed a fascination with armaments that also lasted his entire life.





Gerald Gardner, the Father of Wicca, strikes a mysterious pose. Gardner popularised the religion during the 1940s and 50s

In 1907, Gardner joined the Legion of Frontiersmen, a home guard set to defend against a German invasion

The festival of Samhain, All Hallows' Eve, is celebrated in Glastonbury as pagans gather to mark the night of the dead

Gardner spent nine years in Madeira, a Portuguese island colony, and rarely returned to England. Since he was abroad for much of his youth, Gardner never attended formal schools and essentially taught himself to read and write. After Com married David Elkington, owner of a tea plantation in Ceylon (Sri Lanka today), Gardner moved with the couple and learned the rudiments of running the enterprise. He became fascinated with the Buddhist beliefs of the local Singhalese people. Returning to England in 1907, he gravitated toward a family of relatives, the Sergenesons, who were interested in fantasy and mysticism. They often described experiences such as seeing fairies. Gardner claimed also that these family members introduced him to the story that his own grandfather was a practising witch. He often told a story that the family believed an ancestor had been burned at the stake as a witch in Newburgh in 1610.

Gardner participated in archaeological digs in Egypt and became a fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute in the 1930s

Gardner returned to Ceylon late in 1907 to participate in the administration of a rubber plantation that his father had invested in. He became interested in Freemasonry and joined the lodge in the capital city of Colombo, but within four years the rubber enterprise had failed. His father sold the real estate, and Gardner wandered to Borneo. Considering himself an amateur anthropologist and archaeologist, he associated with the native Dusun and Dyak peoples on the Asian island. He was enthralled by their social customs, and particularly their religious practices, reportedly participating in native rituals. During this period he contracted malaria and moved on to Singapore.

While working on a rubber plantation, Gardner was befriended by an American Muslim named Cornwall, who introduced him to the tenets of that faith. While amassing real estate that totalled hundreds of acres, Gardner made the confession of the Islamic faith but never became a practising Muslim himself. Soon after the outbreak of World War I, he joined the Malay States Volunteer Rifles, but later concluded that he could help the war effort more significantly by returning to England. He arrived in 1916, attempted to enlist in the Royal Navy, but was denied due to health issues. He volunteered to work in a hospital outside Liverpool and experienced the horrors of combat-wounded soldiers while working as an orderly. A recurrence of his malaria prompted a return to Malaya that autumn, and he worked for the local government as an inspector of rubber commerce, probably amassing some wealth as he took bribes to ignore a brisk black market trade in opium.

For Gardner, a turning point in his life of occult enquiry occurred in 1927 as his father suffered from dementia, prompting a return to England. Visiting spiritual mediums and attending séances and other rituals, he believed that spirits of deceased family members were quite active. An encounter with

The pagan sabbats

Wiccans and other pagans celebrate eight major holidays, or sabbats, during a calendar year. These holy days make up the wheel of the year and are based on ancient pagan holy days marking the Earth's movement around the Sun and the change of seasons. Some Wiccans celebrate only the four cross-quarter days, Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh and Samhain, while others will celebrate all eight holy days, including Yule, Ostara, Midsummer and Mabon.

Imbolc, the first holy feast of the year, is observed on 1 and 2 February. Marking early spring, Imbolc recognises emergence from winter and lauds Brigid as a goddess. Ostara, the spring equinox, is observed around 21 March, commemorating the arrival of spring after the long winter. Beltane, also known as May Day, is celebrated on 1 May. Beltane is a celebration of fertility and procreation.

Midsummer is celebrated around 21 June, the summer solstice and longest day of the year. Wiccans observe the union of Heaven, Earth and Sun, while stressing healing magic and energy. Lughnasadh, also called Lammas, is celebrated on 1 August, marking the first of three harvest events. Mabon, the autumn equinox, is observed around 21 September, marking the second harvest festival as the season changes from summer to autumn.

Samhain, All Hallows' Eve, is celebrated on 31 October, marking what is for some the pagan new year, the night of the dead. Yule is celebrated between 20-22 December to mark the winter solstice. The observance symbolises the return of the Sun to rule the sky.

"Gardner believed that spirits of deceased family members were quite active"

Gerald Gardner once owned and operated the Museum of Witchcraft. Its successor is now located in Boscastle, Cornwall, UK

the spirit of a dead cousin profoundly affected his perspective on mysticism, and from that time he devoted much of his academic interests to the ideas of Spiritualism and an afterlife.

A whirlwind courtship and marriage took place that summer when he met Dorothea Frances 'Donna' Rosedale. He proposed the next day, and two weeks later, on 16 August, the couple married. Soon they returned to Malaya, and Gardner renewed his association with Freemasonry while working on archaeological digs and becoming more involved with folklore, mysticism and anthropology. During the 1930s he travelled further, spending time in Egypt, and in London he was introduced to the cult of the Mother Goddess. He lectured and wrote a book on weaponry and travelled throughout Asia, retiring to England at the insistence of his wife after his father's death in 1935.

Even after returning to Europe, the wanderlust continued, and Gardner travelled to the Middle East, becoming taken with the pagan goddess Ashtoreth and studying the deities of other ancient religions of the region, including Judaism. Plagued by chronic poor health, he was referred to a doctor who suggested that nudism might improve his physical fitness. As a member of a club in north London, he is thought to have met several influential people, one of whom introduced him to a contemporary pagan religion called Dionysianism. While traveling in the Mediterranean and living for months on the island of Cyprus, he wrote the novel *A Goddess Arrives*. After returning to England, he helped dig air raid trenches in London and volunteered as an air raid warden as World War II erupted in 1939.

Relocating temporarily to Highcliffe to escape incessant German bombing of London, Gardner became involved with the Rosicrucian Order Crotona Fellowship, whose founder Alexander Sullivan claimed to be the reincarnation of numerous historical figures, including Pythagoras and Francis Bacon. While questioning many of the group's beliefs and practices, Gardner became particularly fond of several of its members. In September 1939 he was taken to an old house, required to remove his clothing, and guided through some sort of initiation ceremony during which he heard the word 'wica' and recognised it as Old English for 'witch'.

He later asserted that this group constituted the New Forest coven. He became interested in Druidry, a religious movement that stresses harmony amongst all things in the natural world, and joined the Ancient Druid Order, a fraternal organisation that initiated its members. He frequented its ceremonies and rites such as its Midsummer ritual at the ancient Stonehenge site. At the same time, he joined the Folk-Lore Society and the Society for Psychical Research, while speaking on various topics.

In the spring of 1947, Gardner met Aleister Crowley, who had founded the religion of

> In a 1951 magazine interview, Gardner asserted, "Of course I'm a witch. And I get great fun out of it"

The Book of Shadows

The 'Book of Shadows' is an ancient term that originally related to the body of spells, incantations and ritual information belonging to an individual witch. Upon that witch's death, their personal book was traditionally destroyed. However, Gerald Gardner, the father of modern Wicca, used the title as a vehicle for a collection of such spells and ritual material in combination with his own writings and observations when he published *Book of Shadows* during the late 1940s or early 1950s. Gardner promoted his *Book of Shadows* as containing early spells and incantations that were rooted in ancient texts. Further analysis revealed that much of its content was taken from the Renaissance grimoire text called the *Key of Solomon* along with other writings.

Doreen Valiente, the one-time high priestess of the Bricket Wood coven, later made extensive revisions to Gardner's *Book of Shadows* when serious questions as to its authorship and content emerged. Some observers have speculated that the concept of the *Book of Shadows*, as Gardner promoted it, was his own invention. Valiente said that the idea came to him after viewing a magazine ad in 1949, and she was among the first to question his assertions. He reportedly responded to her inquiry by saying, "Well, if you think you can do better, go ahead."

Gerald Gardner popularised modern Wicca with the publication of his *Book of Shadows* in the mid-20th century

Doreen Valiente became a close associate of Gerald Gardner and high priestess of the Bricket Wood coven

Thelema in 1904. Their association grew, and Gardner was elevated to high status in the Ordo Templi Orientis, a fraternal order in which Crowley was an influential member. Crowley died in 1947, and Gardner learned of this while travelling around the United States. For a while he led the Ordo Templi Orientis in Europe, but soon moved on to his most significant investment of time and effort.

Throughout his formative years, Gardner had become more familiar with contemporary pagan faiths, which were in a rudimentary form in the 1920s, borrowing both from ancient witchcraft and new ideas. He came to the conclusion that these were the surviving remnants of a witch cult that predated Christianity, as explained in the writings of author Margaret Murray. Gardner began to advocate the practice of paganism, including some of its rituals, in his fictional work *High Magic's Aid*, as he sought to revive the religion. He utilised the *Key of Solomon*, a Renaissance grimoire text, as a basis for much of his work, and began to put together his own volume of relevant information, known as *Ye Bok of Ye Art Magical*.

Numerous Wiccan spells and incantations were written in the book, and Gardner later said that it was the basis for his *Book of Shadows*, a text that helped to popularise Wicca in the mid-20th century.

Gardner had travelled frequently to London and visited a nudist club called Spielplatz, and his interest in Druidry had increased. He purchased land near the town of Bricket Wood and became active in another nudist enclave nearby. He later purchased an old building, deemed a 'witch's cabin', from a friend and brought it to Bricket Wood, where he held a sort of pagan ritual possibly based on ceremonial magic, founding the Bricket Wood coven during the 1940s. Its first members came from the nearby nudist colony.

Although the phrase 'Book of Shadows' has long been descriptive of a witch's personal volume that contains their own spells and rituals, Gardner explained that his book contained ancient information given to him as a member of the New Forest coven along with some of his own observations and contributions. While he asserted that much of the book was rooted in ancient witchcraft, a great portion of the *Book of Shadows* is believed to have originated with the *Key of Solomon*, the *Gospel of Witches*, which was written by Charles Godfrey Leland and belonged to an Italian coven, the writings of Crowley, and even poet Rudyard Kipling.

While observing the Midsummer ritual in 1953, Gardner initiated Doreen Valiente into Wicca, and she later became high priestess of the Bricket Wood coven. She assisted Gardner in the preparation of the *Book of Shadows* for publication and later made significant alterations to it after much of its content was deemed to have been lifted from other works. Nevertheless, Gardner had asserted that earlier witches had refrained from recording their rituals and incantations for fear of persecution. Later, however, as they began to do so, the *Book of Shadows* had become a significant text, raising the profile of Wicca in popular culture and subsequently attracting a growing number of followers during the 1950s and 60s.

> One of Gardner's high priestesses initially sold many of his possessions to Ripley's Believe It or Not! after his death

Defining moment

The family practitioners

Early 1907

Although his Anglican family has had little to do with their relatives, the Sergenesons, because the latter are Methodists, Gerald becomes enamoured with them as they are willing to discuss the paranormal with him and relate tales of such occurrences in their lives. From the Sergenesons, Gardner learns an old story that his grandfather had actually been a witch, and hears that one of his ancestors had been tried and found guilty of witchcraft in the early 1600s. That relative was burned for the crime. The time Gardner spends with these relatives fuels a growing interest in the occult, leading to further discoveries.

Timeline

1884

- **Gardner is born**
  On this date, Friday the 13th, Gerald Gardner is born into a wealthy family in Blundellsands, Lancashire, England. His father, William, and mother, Maria, have five sons and three daughters.
  13 June 1884

1888

- **Travels abroad begin**
  Gerald's ill health at age four prompts his nursemaid, Josephine 'Com' McCombie, to offer to take the boy abroad. Travels to France, the Canary Islands, the African coast and Madeira follow.
  Summer 1888

1923

- **A government employee**
  Gardner accepts a position in the Office of Customs in Malaya, travelling extensively as an inspector of the rubber industry. He becomes responsible for overseeing opium commerce and probably accepts bribes.
  September 1923

1927

- **Meeting a mystic**
  After travelling to Britain to visit his sick father, Gardner begins evaluating mysticism and experiences contact with dead relatives. One mystic apparently summons a deceased cousin, leaving a lasting impression on Gardner.
  28 July 1927

1927

- **A whirlwind courtship**
  Gardner marries Dorothea Frances Rosedale, known as Donna. The two have met only days earlier, coincidentally on the same evening that Gardner met the medium who conjured up his late cousin.
  16 August 1927

1936

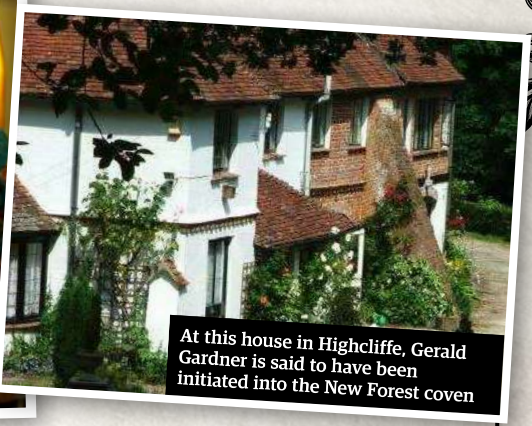
- **Retirement and return to Britain**
  Gardner retires from the civil service, intending to remain in Malaya; however, Donna insists that they return to Britain, facilitating further adventures in the occult and Gardner's foray into Wicca.
  January 1936

1937

- **A doctoral degree**
  Perhaps compensating for his lack of formal education, Gardner purchases a doctoral degree of dubious academic value. He begins using the title 'Dr.' and makes further unsubstantiated academic claims in 1951.
  September 1937

This elaborately adorned and bound witch's personal *Book of Shadows* resides in an individual's collection

This Wiccan altar includes such items as a cauldron emblazoned with a pentagram along with a ceremonial chalice



At this house in Highcliffe, Gerald Gardner is said to have been initiated into the New Forest coven

Through the blend of ancient, contemporary and personal writings, tenets and perspectives, Gardner developed the modern Wicca religion and became known as its father. After the British government repealed its long-standing Witchcraft Laws in 1951, Gardner published *Witchcraft Today*, another popular text, three years later, and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* in 1959.

Along with his close circle of friends, particularly Valiente, he led the transformation of modern witchcraft into the Wicca movement. Capitalising on the turbulent times, the principles of Wicca - including a break from traditional religion, growing interest in occultism and spirituality, and an emphasis on unconventional lifestyles and harmony with nature - grew in popularity in Britain, the United States, Continental Europe and Australia.

Gardner promoted Wicca at every opportunity, even inviting the media to write articles on the topic in the belief that publicity was the only way for the faith to grow. While some of the resulting public scrutiny was unfavourable, interest continued to expand. One of the most difficult aspects of Wicca emanates from its mystic, secretive nature. Throughout Western history, 'witches' were incorrectly associated with Satanism, and Wiccans still struggle to get those unfamiliar with it to differentiate it from devil worship.

During his last years, Gardner continued to guide the Bricket Wood coven. He brought several high priestesses into the Wicca fold, including Valiente, Lois Bourne, Patricia Crowther and Eleanor Bone. He became a principal in the Museum of Magic and Witchcraft, then located on the Isle of Man and associated with others who helped popularise Wicca, including author Robert Graves, whose book *The White Goddess* became a prominent vehicle for the rising popularity of the religion.

Gardner died in 1964 at the age of 79. As so often in his life, he was travelling at the time. Intending to visit Lebanon, he collapsed with a massive heart attack at the breakfast table one morning aboard ship. He was buried in Tunisia with little fanfare - but not before he had become the catalyst for a religious movement that counted more than 50,000 members in Western Europe and the United States by the early 1980s.

Defining moment

Inspired by the theatre

August 1939

While residing in Highcliffe, Hampshire, the Gardners attend a play about the life of Pythagoras in a small theatre associated with the Rosicrucian Order Crotona Fellowship. Although Donna dislikes the production, Gerald is inquisitive and begins attending local meetings of the mystic group. He soon becomes critical of many of its beliefs, particularly the claims made by its founder, Alexander Sullivan, that he is the reincarnation of several famous individuals. When a group leader declares that Britain will not become involved in World War II and the country declares war on Nazi Germany the following day, Gardner discounts the organisation's veracity.

Defining moment

Gerald
Brosseau
Gardner
1884-1964
Father of Modern
Witchcraft
Lived Here
1938-1945

Questions and comments

Summer 1953

Doreen Valiente reviews the *Book of Shadows* and questions Gardner's source material, particularly noting that some passages are similar to the writings of well-known occultist Aleister Crowley, while others may have been taken from the *Key of Solomon* - a text thought to have originated during the Renaissance - and other works rather than ancient sources as Gardner had represented. He reportedly admits that he has appropriated these materials to supplement his own writings and other available information included in the book. Valiente undertakes a substantial revision of the text, destined to become popular during the surge of interest in modern Wicca.

1939

- **Initiation into New Forest coven**
  Gardner is friendly with several Rosicrucian members, particularly Edith Woodford-Grimes, or 'Dafo'. They take him to a house owned by Dorothy Clutterbuck, 'Old Dorothy', where he is initiated into the New Forest coven.
  September 1939

1947

- **The Bricket Wood coven**
  Buying land at Bricket Wood near Hertfordshire, Gardner also purchases an old 'witch's cottage', and reassembles it there. During Midsummer, he hosts a ceremony and becomes founder of the Bricket Wood coven.
  21 June 1947

1951

- **Repeal of the Witchcraft Act**
  The British government repeals the Witchcraft Act of 1735, prompting Gardner to begin publishing his writings. The *Book of Shadows* becomes a prominent text during the growth of modern Wicca.
  22 June 1951

1953

- **Initiation of Doreen Valiente**
  After corresponding with Gardner since the prior year, Doreen Valiente requests initiation into the Bricket Wood coven during Midsummer observances. Although he hesitates at first, Gardner agrees. Doreen soon becomes high priestess.
  21 June 1953

1964

- **Death of Gardner**
  While travelling to Lebanon, Gardner dies aboard ship and is buried in Tunisia. Years later his grave is relocated and a plaque attached to it that reads, 'Father of Modern Wicca. Beloved of the Great Goddess.'
  12 February 1964

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The REAL WITCHES CRAFT

Alex Sanders (born Orrell Alexander Carter) took Britain's witchcraft world by storm through the creation of Alexandrian Wicca and a string of scandals

Many members of the witchcraft community write books on the subject in an attempt to help the public understand it

The man behind Alexandrian Wicca

How one man created his own brand of witchcraft, and in doing so created a phenomenon that is still rocking the Wiccan community today

Written by Poppy-Jay Palmer

After his unconventional upbringing, it's no surprise that Orrell Alexander Carter, later known as Alex Sanders, went on to establish Alexandrian Wicca, a brand of witchcraft that took Britain by storm.

Raised in an English working-class family, his mother and grandmother introduced him to esoteric ideas from a young age, which lead him to a career as a medium in his local Spiritualist churches, as well as the study and practice of ceremonial magic. Since Sanders' initiation into witchcraft there have been many contradictory accounts as to how it happened. Even Sanders' version is inconsistent. But his most famous account, as given in his biography, *King Of The Witches* by June Johns, goes as follows: "One evening in 1933, when I was seven, I was sent round to my grandmother's house for tea."

"For some reason I didn't knock at the door as I went in, and was confronted by my grandmother, naked, with her grey hair hanging down her waist, standing in a circle drawn on the kitchen floor." According to Sanders, his grandmother told him to step into the circle, take off his clothes and put his head between his thighs. Nicking his genitals with a sickle-knife, she said, "You are one of us now."

However, it has since been revealed that the scrotum-nicking part of the story wasn't actually true, and was instead fabricated for publicity. Once he became famous, Sanders gained a reputation for exaggerating and making things up about his early life.

For a few years after working as a medium, Sanders went on to have a somewhat normal life. He got a job in a manufacturing chemist's laboratory in Manchester, and even married and had two children. But he still harboured a deep interest in the supernatural. His first wife, Doreen Stretton, didn't approve. The marriage eventually failed when Sanders wanted more children and Stretton didn't. According to his second wife Maxine, a fellow Wiccan, Sanders was grief-stricken, and cursed Stretton with fertility. She remarried and had three sets of twins.

Following his divorce and loss of custody over his children, Sanders became isolated, and decided to live life on the 'left-hand path'. According to Sanders, he began to dabble in black magic in an attempt to gain money and sexual success. Soon after, he was taken in by an extremely wealthy middle-aged couple that claimed he was the double of their late son. They fed and clothed him, and treated him as one of the family. He threw great parties and became sexually promiscuous, and had everything he wanted. However, the black magic eventually turned sour: one of Sanders' favourite mistresses committed suicide, and his sister was injured in a shooting accident and diagnosed with terminal cancer shortly afterwards. The turn of events led to an epiphany, and it was then that Sanders decided to stop using magic for selfish reasons and to teach it to others instead.

But his bad luck continued: in 1963, Sanders started studying the works of Egyptian mage Abramelin, with more unfortunate consequences. He claimed angels told him to seek work as a book-duster and odd-job man at John Rylands Library in Manchester to gain access to an original copy of the *Key of Solomon*. However, an allegation that he had defecated in the library's basement led to the discovery that he had also been ripping out the pages of his coveted book and taking them home. As a result, he was almost prosecuted until it was agreed that he would return the materials and be dismissed from the library without being charged.

Sanders finally embraced Wicca in the early 1960s following correspondence and meetings with Sheffield occultist Patricia Crowther. He convinced the *Manchester Evening News* to run a front-page article on the subject, and both lost his job and grew estranged from the Crowther family, who refused to initiate him, as a result. He eventually found someone else to initiate him into a different coven. Over the years, many initiates came and went, but Sanders remained and worked his way up to High Priest status. Shortly afterwards, Sanders met his second

Sanders claimed descent from 14th century Welsh prince Owain Glyndŵr, portrayed as a magician by Shakespeare

"Sanders became isolated, and decided to live life on the 'left-hand path'"

Wicca has greatly developed since its conception, with neopaganism taking on historical beliefs of the past, but adding a new spin

Alex Sanders quickly rose through the ranks of Wicca and ended up becoming a High Priest and starting his own covens

wife Maxine, who he made his High Priestess. The pair married, moved to London and continued running their coven and teaching witchcraft classes from their basement flat. By 1965, Sanders had developed his own brand of witchcraft, known as Alexandrian Wicca, claimed over 1,500 initiates in 100 covens, and declared himself 'King of the Witches'.

Like other traditional witchcraft systems, Alexandrian Wicca believes that only a witch can make another witch through an initiation. As with Gardnerian Wicca, the initiation for Alexandrian Wicca consists of three levels, often referred to as the 'first', 'second' and 'third' degree, with only second and third degree witches being able to initiate new witches, and only thirds being able to initiate others to third degree (also known as a 'High Priestess' or 'High Priest'). Some Alexandrians have added a preliminary rank called 'neophyte' or 'dedicant' since the level system's conception so potential witches can get a taste before committing. Neophytes are not bound by oath, but are also not considered to have officially joined the tradition, and are therefore not able to experience certain aspects of its oath-bound rituals. When put side by side with Gardnerian Wicca, Alexandrian is more eclectic, with Maxine Sanders noting that Alexandrians take the attitude of 'if it works, use it'.

Following a newspaper article published about him in 1969, Sanders shot to fame both inside and out of the Wicca community. His goings-on inspired June Johns' romanticised biography and the 1970 film *Legend Of The Witches*, and led to television appearances and public speaking events. However, he was often criticised by other witches who believed that he was exploiting the Craft, even though Maxine Sanders often insisted that he was merely trying to divert attention away from other witches. One such publicity stunt involved Sanders promising reporters that he could bring a corpse back to life when the media started to get curious about the activities of the couple that ran Sanders' coven. Putting on a show, Sanders had an associate pose as a doctor to verify that the 'corpse' was dead before he commenced reading an 'ancient' invocation that was actually a Swiss roll recipe read backwards, which caused the 'corpse' to come to life. Unbelievably, the reporters bought it.

Despite the scandals, Sanders was also famous for pulling off a number of magical feats. He was alleged to have created a 'spiritual baby' called Michael, whose birth was believed to be a result of a sacred act of masturbation that occurred between Sanders and a male assistant (Sanders claimed that Michael disappeared to grow up, but later returned in spirit to forcibly make Sanders party hard, insult people and act odiously).

Sanders' other alleged magical feats included the following: curing a heroin addict, curing a woman's cystitis by willing it away, curing a woman of cancer by sitting at her hospital bed for three days while pouring healing energy into her via her feet, ending multiple pregnancies, and getting rid of warts by wishing them on others. Sanders' most famous feat, however, involved his own daughter, Janice: she was born in dry labour, with one foot twisted backwards. After being told there was nothing to be done, Sanders anointed the foot with olive oil and set it straight. Janice was cured, and only walked with a limp during bad weather.

In 1979, Sanders announced that he wished to make amends for hurting the witchcraft community in the past, and insisted that witches should put aside their differences to unite and become respected. Turning over a new leaf, he partnered with psychic and trance medium Derek Taylor, and developed the magical work of his Order, the Order Della Luna in Constantinople. The pair reportedly worked with spirits, celestial intelligences and the demiurge, writing journals of channelled notes, and even caught a warning of World War III. Away from Taylor, Sanders also operated London-based group the Order of Deucalion, which focused on Atlantean magical research.

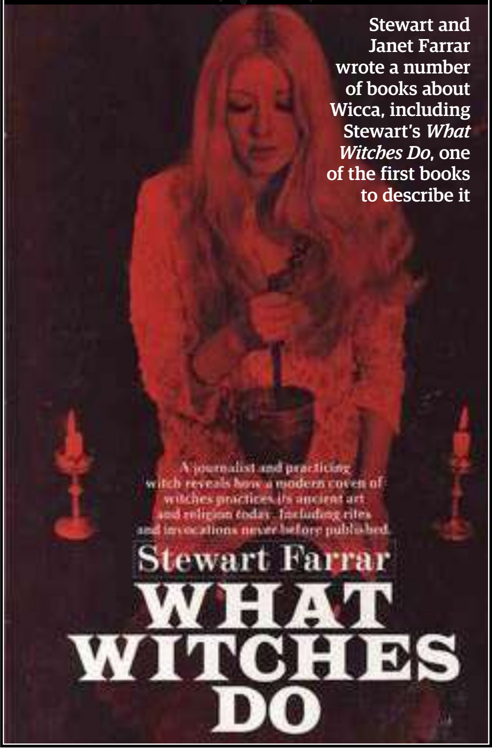
Sanders died of lung cancer in 1988, aged 61, but his brand of witchcraft lived on. Alexandrian Wicca has slowly become one of the religion's most widely recognised traditions, and is practiced in Canada, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Australia, Brazil, the United States and South Africa, as well as in Britain.

Meet the Farrars

Like Alex and Maxine Sanders, Stewart and Janet Farrar were another influential couple in the Wiccan world during the 20th century. After being initiated into Alexandrian Wicca separately by Alex and Maxine Sanders in 1970, the pair met, married and became co-authors, collaborating on books like *A Witches' Bible: Volume I & II* (1981), *The Witches' Way* (1984) and *Spells And How They Work* (1990), among others. Stewart also wrote a number of books independently, including 1971's pivotal *What Witches Do*, one of the first books to describe the then-new religion.

Alexandrian Wicca's name was actually chosen when Stewart once asked Sanders what witches who were initiated into Wicca via their covens should be called. After discussing the matter, he came up with the term 'Alexandrian'. Before that time, Alex and Maxine Sanders were both happy being referred to as witches, but the new name stuck. Stewart quickly rose through the ranks to High Priest, and founded a new coven in south London with Janet as his High Priestess. From there, the coven grew and multiplied.

The Farrars later became interested in neopaganism, a modern religious movement influenced by historical pagan beliefs. Stewart died in 2000, but Janet continued writing and became a frequent guest lecturer on the subjects of Wicca and neopaganism. She is now married to neopagan author Gavin Bone.


Stewart and Janet Farrar wrote a number of books about Wicca, including Stewart's *What Witches Do*, one of the first books to describe it

A journalist and practicing witch reveals how a modern coven of witches practices its ancient art and religion today. Including rites and invocations never before published.

Stewart Farrar

WHAT WITCHES DO

© Alamy, Getty Images

Sigils & magical

Since the dawn of time, mankind has used secret arcane marks to call out to the gods, and cast magic spells to win their desires...

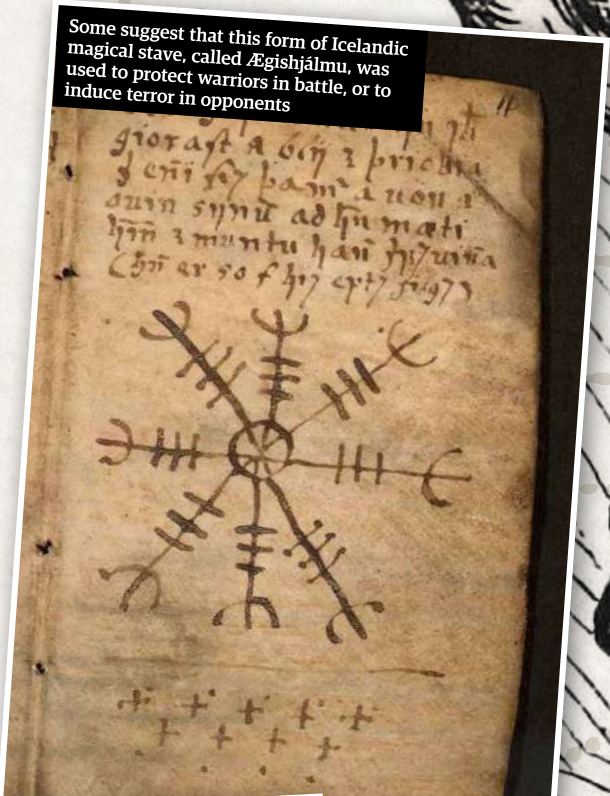
Written by Dee Dee Chainey

While in more recent times sigils are most commonly used as a symbolic representation of a magician's magical intention, particularly in chaos magic, they have an ancient and varied history. Traces of strange markings are found as far back as prehistory, with rock-carved suns and circles dancing over the stones of Neolithic megalithic tombs, their meaning in ancient rituals now lost to time. In 98 CE, Tacitus himself explained how the Germanic peoples used signs - possibly runes - for reading omens. They also appear in the runes of the Vikings, and *Sigrdrífumál* in the *Poetic Edda* tells how runes can be used for magic: ale runes guard against being bewitched by the ale served by a host's wife, while wave runes are carved on a ship to protect it at sea. Icelandic magical staves were sigils used after the early modern period for love magic, protection, success and even revenge on enemies.

> Apotropaic marks are sigil-like symbols designed to ward off evil influences, often called witches' marks or hex marks

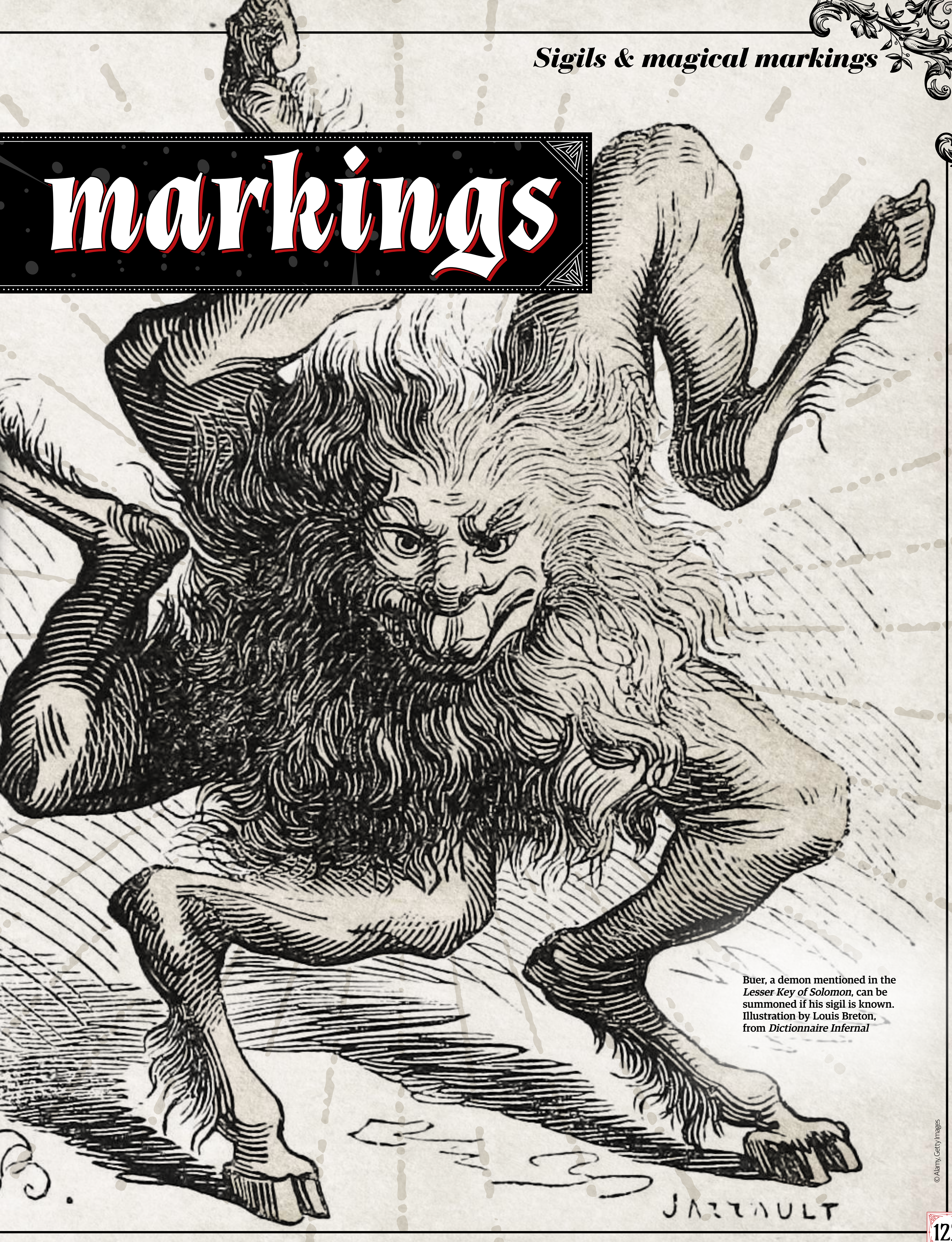
Further afield, there are the yantra of the Hindu Tantra. Linked with astrology, they are used for meditation, and to worship of the gods, with a specific diagram attributed to each. In Voudun, veves are sigils that represent an entity - this time the loa, who can be described as a being between a deity and elemental spirit. The symbol is a visual symbol of the loa during a ritual or ceremony, helping them to descend to earth, and offerings like food and drink can be placed upon the marks.

The word 'sigil' itself stems from the Latin 'sigillum', meaning 'sign'. They are most commonly known for representing the 'true name' of a demon, angel or entity a medieval magician might wish to summon with ceremonial magic. Sigils can be created using magic squares (kameas). All you need to do is translate the letters of the demon's name into numbers, and then locate these around the square. As lines are drawn between them, the pattern - or sigil - is created. The magician would then have control of this being, as he held knowledge of its name: by naming something, we have power over it. Once created, these sigils were collected in grimoires, large books used for studying the arcane art of high magic. The *Lesser Key of Solomon* is one of the most famous grimoires, listing the sigils of the 72 princes of the hierarchy of hell.


Some suggest that this form of Icelandic magical stave, called Ægishjálmu, was used to protect warriors in battle, or to induce terror in opponents

In *Hávamál*, an Old Norse poem, the god Odin tells how the runes can be used for both divination and necromancy

markings



Buer, a demon mentioned in the *Lesser Key of Solomon*, can be summoned if his sigil is known. Illustration by Louis Breton, from *Dictionnaire Infernal*

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Embracing the chaos

Sorcery gets experimental with chaos magic. Step into the shoes of a chaos magician with a look at how the practice works...

Written by Poppy-Jay Palmer

Where other occult traditions like Wicca and Thelema are based on religions with set rules and values, the practice of chaos magic goes in the opposite direction: it rejects the existence of absolute truth and views other occult traditions as arbitrary symbol-systems that end up being effective purely because of the practitioners' beliefs. Instead of wholly believing in the existence of magic or a supernatural force, students of chaos magic take a rather agnostic approach. The practice is sometimes referred to as 'success magic' or 'results-based magic', as it leans on the idea that practitioners should simply use what works. Belief is a tool for achieving desired results. It is unclear where the term 'chaos magic' initially came from, but the term fits. In his 1978 books *Liber Null* and *Psychonaut*, English occultist Peter J Carroll said:

"It could well be called 'God' or 'Tao', but the name 'Chaos' is virtually meaningless and free from the anthropomorphic ideas of religion."

Most magical traditions, including Wicca, Kabbalah and the systems based on the Golden Dawn's practices, work towards bringing about change through beliefs, rituals, attitudes, moral codes and a conceptual model of the universe. But chaos magic grew out of a need to strip magic down to the basics, leaving only the techniques used to affect change. A belief in the supernatural isn't necessary within chaos magic, but the practice still includes a series of general principles. Often referred to as a pick 'n' mix or DIY approach, chaos magicians put a lot of emphasis on results-based magic, meaning the practices of different chaos magicians are often drastically different, to the point where authors often encourage readers to invent their own style and methods. Chaos magic is the polar opposite of an exact art: most practitioners operate under the attitude of 'if it works, use it'.

The defining doctrine of chaos magic is the idea (or rather, 'meta-belief') that belief is a tool

Artist and occultist Austin Osman Spare and his life's work were a huge influence when it came to setting the foundations of chaos magic for achieving effects. Practitioners of the art think that systems like Kabbalah, astrology and the I Ching should be treated as symbolic and linguistic constructs that don't actually contain any absolute or objective truth. Instead, the beliefs they hold can be manipulated to achieve certain ends, with religious scholar Hugh Urban describing the position as a "rejection of all fixed models of reality." In short, nothing is true if everything is permitted. Influences on this standpoint are believed to have stemmed from a number of sources and magical systems, most notably that of Austin Osman Spare, an English artist and occultist born in 1886, who became interested in occultism during his early years. Spare believed that belief itself was a form of psychic energy that could easily become locked up in rigid belief structures. He attempted to break down those structures, and then direct the 'free belief' into new aims.

Developing the practice even further, Spare liked to use symbols as a means to communicate desire to what he called 'Kia', a kind of universal mind that includes individual human consciousnesses, via the 'passage' of consciousness. These desires would then grow into 'obsessions' if there was enough free belief to feed them, and culminate into magical results that occurred in reality. Borrowing Spare's model and altering it slightly, Peter J Carroll used 'Kia' to refer to the consciousness of the individual, with the more general universal force being called 'Chaos'. The use of the term 'chaos' has led to countless misunderstandings in the past, with non-practitioners presuming chaos magic is to do with literal chaos and disorder, or the gods of chaos.

Since the conception of Spare and Carroll's definitions, chaos practitioners have insisted that the basic operating process of chaos magic can be explained in different ways. With a spirit model, the shaman communicates their goals to spirits that help work magic on their behalf. With a psychological model, a magician uses symbols to condition their unconsciousness to achieve their goals. With an energy model, a magician directs their own chi towards their goals, and with an informational model, a magician works towards their goals through transmitting information to an underlying matrix or field.

As with other forms of magic, chaos magic involves its own specific range of practices, and as chaos magic leans heavily on experimentation, it's all about stripping down the magical techniques and incorporating different practices from different traditions, from Thelemic rituals and Wiccan rites to energy healing, to see what works. However, a few different practices have, over time, been developed specifically for chaos magic. According

> "Spare liked to use symbols as a means to communicate desire to what he called 'Kia'"

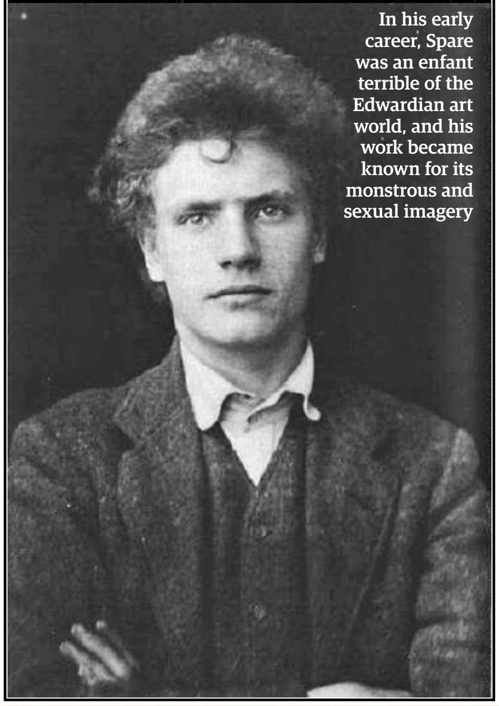
As a young man, Austin Osman Spare was briefly involved with Aleister Crowley's A∴A∴ organisation

When chaos magic began to borrow from popular culture, the work of HP Lovecraft became a big point of reference

A pair of chaos magicians from the UK, holding a skull and ceremonial staff shortly after a ritual

Austin Osman Spare

Born in London in 1886, Austin Osman Spare became an artist, a visionary and a huge influencer when it came to chaos magic. He was an unconventional member of the art world and quickly hailed as a genius by many. However, after falling out of the gallery system and into poverty, he went underground and immersed himself in the world of occultism and sorcery. His passion for art persisted and he continued to create, but his pieces were usually inspired by his new interests, and his work became known for its clear use of line and depiction of monstrous and sexual imagery. At the same time, he began to develop magical philosophies of pleasure and the nature of reality, as well as magical techniques like automatic writing and drawing, and sigilisation based on his theories regarding the relationship between the conscious and unconscious self. After his death in 1956, Spare's development of sigils lived on through his friend, the Thelemite author Kenneth Grant, and his work involving sigils became a key influence in the chaos magic movement during the 20th century. His life and work is still studied today.


In his early career, Spare was an enfant terrible of the Edwardian art world, and his work became known for its monstrous and sexual imagery

Artist Brion Gysin and writer William S Burroughs were pioneers of the cut-up technique that is still used by practicing chaos magicians today

to the teachings of the tradition, successfully executing a magical act is dependent on bypassing the conscious mind. The gnostic state, or gnosis, is used to do this, and describes the unaltered state of consciousness that occurs when a person's mind is fixed on one point, thought or goal.

Mastering the gnostic state usually takes years of training, but chaos magicians have developed a series of shortcuts to achieve a brief 'no-mind' state, including inhibitory gnosis (a deep form of meditation that uses things like breathing techniques, self-hypnosis techniques, absent thought processes and progressive muscle relaxation), ecstatic gnosis (which involves reaching a 'no-mind' state through intense arousal, including sexual excitation, intense emotions, dance, chanting, hyperventilation and more), and indifferent vacuity, which involves spells being cast parenthetically so as not to raise much thought for the magician to suppress.

> Rather than devote belief to a particular god or entity, chaos magicians treat belief itself as a conceptual tool that they can use

Sigils are also regularly referred to when practicing chaos magic, with magicians using them to write out intentions and then entering the gnostic state to 'launch' the sigil. After charging the sigil, it is necessary to repress all memory of it. During the medieval era, sigils were symbols associated with particular angels or demons and used to summon them. Spare altered the practice entirely, arguing that supernatural beings were simply complexes in the unconscious and could be created through sigilisation. The practice of using sigils has since been expanded by chaos magicians, with practitioner and comic book writer Grant Morrison coining the term 'hypersigil' to refer to an extended work of art with magical meaning and willpower created through sigilisation.

One of the more unique practices of chaos magic is what is known as the cut-up technique, which involves cutting up a passage of text and rearranging it, often at random, to create new text. The technique was pioneered by Brion Gysin and William S Burroughs, the latter of whom was adamant that it had a magical function, rather than being purely for aesthetic purposes. In chaos magic, the idea of using the cut-up technique is to break down the barriers that surround consciousness. The technique itself has been developed over time and is now also applied to other media like film, photography and audio recordings.

Synchronicity is another overlying theme within chaos magic. Synchromysticism (a term which combines 'syncronicity' and 'mysticism') describes the art of realising meaningful coincidences in the seemingly mundane with mystical significance. In *Liber Null and Psychonaut* (published in one volume in 1987), Carroll explains: "A mental event, perception, or an act of will occurs at the same time (synchronously) as an event in the material world... Of course, this can always be excused as coincidence, but most magicians would be quite content with being able to arrange coincidences."

In short, it's all about deriving magical results through association or a series of events that improbably head in a desired direction. *The Chaos Protocol* author, chaos magician Gordon White, further explained the teaching, and suggested that the system of Synchromysticism indicates that the universe speaks in a symbolic language that produces meaning when context is added.

The DIY approach of chaos magic is syncretic, to the point where practitioners are actively encouraged to incorporate pop culture into their magic alongside 'authentic' magical systems. It's not so much the method as the intention that matters. The symbol of chaos, for example, actually originates from Michael Moorcock's *Eternal Champion* fantasy novel series rather than the religion itself. With chaos magic, personal symbolism is the most important thing, and it allows practitioners to adopt any symbols and ideas that they feel are relevant or resonate with them.

The use of pop culture references became popular within the chaos magic community during the 1990s and early 2000s. Kenneth Grant, an English ceremonial magician who studied with both Aleister Crowley and Austin Osman Spare, incorporated elements of HP Lovecraft's famous Cthulhu Mythos into his own magical writings, and inspired many other magicians to do the same. Over time, the overlap between pop culture and chaos magic broadened, and by the mid-1990s chaos had started to leak into pop culture itself. Many of the writers and artists who made strips for sci-fi comic *2000 AD* were practicing chaos magicians, and their work frequently made references to the practice. However, since chaos magic entered the second decade of the 21st century, it has shifted away from pop culture somewhat, and chaos magicians are once again adopting older traditions, following the realisation that imaginary gods and fictional characters maybe don't seem to have the same predictable effects as traditional ones...

Scottish comic book writer Grant Morrison is a practicing chaos magician, and regularly incorporates elements of the tradition into his work

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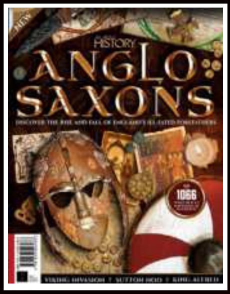
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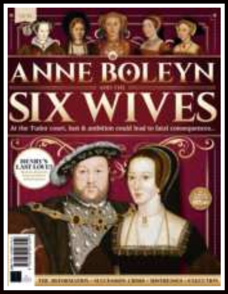
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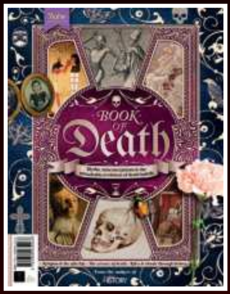
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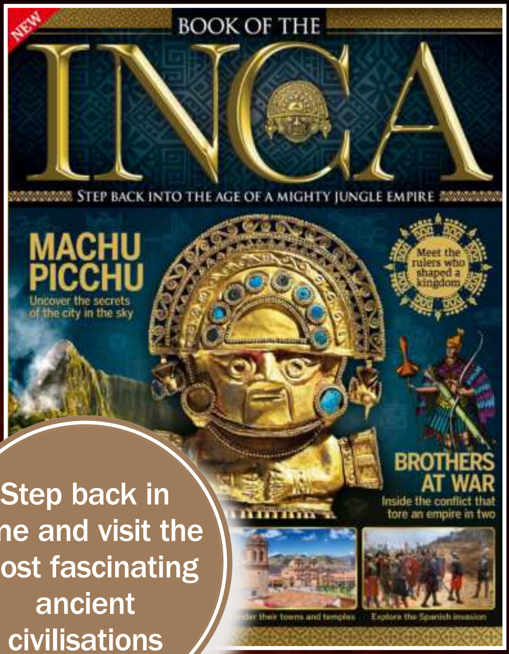
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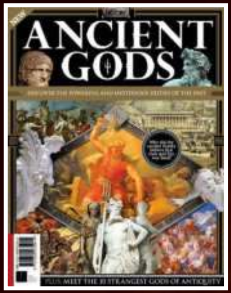
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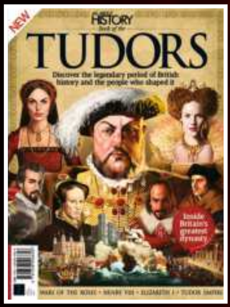
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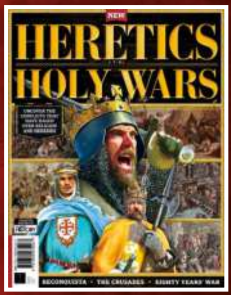
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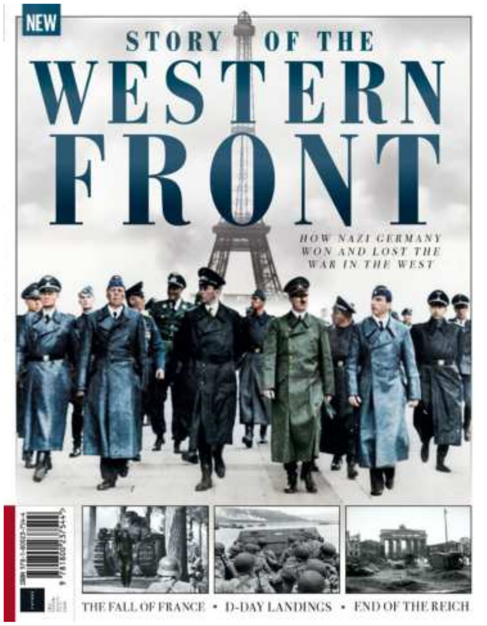
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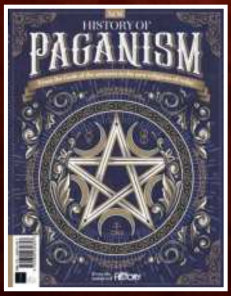
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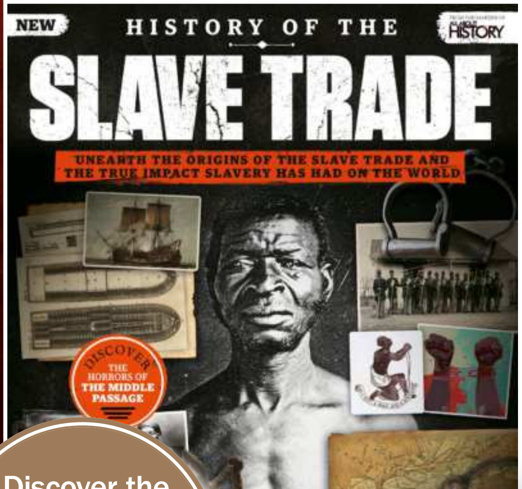
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